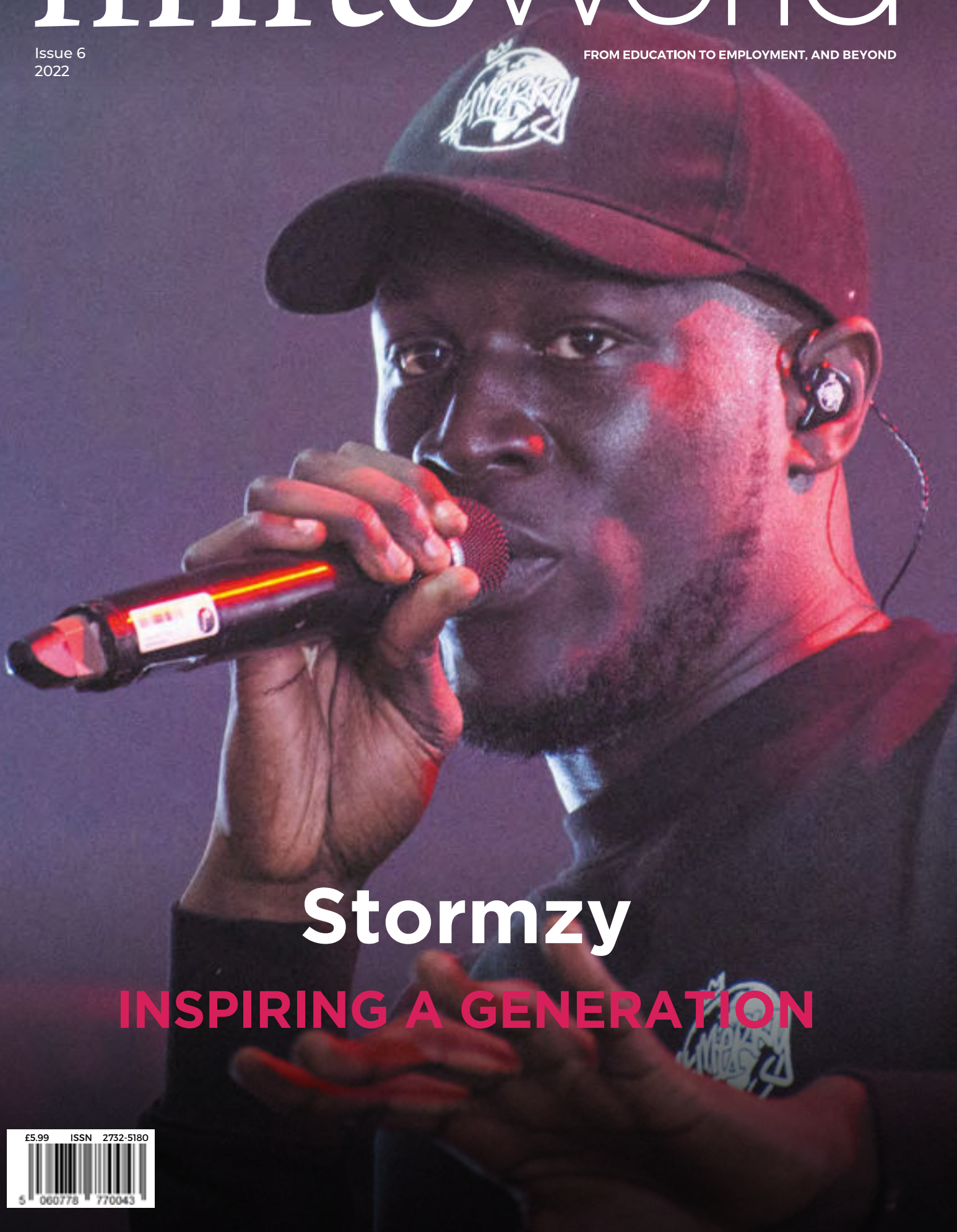


# finitoworld

Issue 6  
2022

FROM EDUCATION TO EMPLOYMENT, AND BEYOND



## Stormzy

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## Founder's Letter



Coping with rejection is something that we all must learn to deal with. It does not matter how successful you are, you will always remember when you were not chosen, shortlisted, selected for a role or failed to gain promotion. During the pandemic, I purposefully allowed myself to be headhunted for a non-executive chair of a museum. At the end of the Zoom interview, I was asked by the panel why did I agree to be included. I responded that I spend so much of my time dealing with candidate mock interviews, I wanted them to know that I had also endured a similar robust selection process. In the end, I did not get appointed but the experience has helped frame my understanding of what it is like.

James Corden famously said: "There is nothing quite like the feeling when you are listening to a song written by someone who you don't know, who you have never met, who somehow manages to describe exactly how you felt at a particular moment in your life." For me, my eclectic tastes include Coldplay and Rachmaninov, so you are no doubt wondering why we are welcoming the rapper, Michael Ebenezer Kwadjo Omari Owuo Jr., to our front cover.

Stormzy has said about his school years: "I was a very naughty child, on the verge of getting expelled, but I wasn't a bad child; everything I did was for my own entertainment." It made me immediately think of my own parents when they read my school reports.

Following his death, there were many tributes to Jamal Edwards, praising his entrepreneurship from those artists who he had helped to launch their careers, including Stormzy, Ed Sheeran, Jessie J and Emeli Sandé who had become household names via his SBTv channel, which grew to have more than a million subscribers. He said: "I wanted to shine a light on talent that wasn't being

represented by mainstream media and make local voices go global," he said. "People call us the millennials but we're the do-it-yourself generation." One minute Jamal was a sales assistant in a West London branch of Topshop, the next his life changed course when he received a royalty cheque for the amateur film clips, he was uploading to YouTube which exceeded his weekly wage.

Stormzy has funded a Scholarship for Black UK Students' at the University of Cambridge which covers tuition costs for two students and maintenance grants for up to four years. He had previously approached the University of Oxford who "didn't want to get involved."

Back to my schooldays. I was a pupil at City of London School for four years, joining aged thirteen. This year, I celebrate 16 years as a Governor, four times the number of my school years. To me, this has always been about giving back to the institution which most provided me with the best foundations for life. A new rule from the City of London Corporation requires Governors to retire after 12 years. I will be incredibly sad to step down.

Someone who has always been inspirational to me is Lord Levene of Portsoken. Peter has been associated with City of London School for 70 years joining as a pupil in 1951 and serving as a Governor for 37 years. In between, he became one of the most high-profile and highly regarded figures in British public life. His autobiography *Send for Levene* makes fascinating reading.

His first experience of work makes me chuckle. He had a summer job at Unilever in the information and statistics department and then the following year a similar job at Courtauld's. They were both remarkably interesting, but they taught him that he did not want to work in a big organisation. At Unilever, he was off for a couple of days and when he came back, they seemed not to have noticed that he had not been there! He realised that he did not want to work somewhere where what he did was irrelevant.

Like Peter, I get inundated with requests, many asking for introductions. He taught me that it is always easier to agree to help, rather than refuse. I must relish doing more. *f*

*Ronel Lehmann*



# Independent thinking is the only basis for a fulfilling career

**The conservative thinker Peter Hitchens begins his book *The Cameron Delusion* with these words: “Conventional wisdom is almost always wrong. By the time it has become conventional, it has ceased to be wisdom and become cant.”**

Hitchens’ brand of conservatism is unfashionable to say the least and he probably wouldn’t have it any other way. The things he’d have to say to be fashionable would be anathema to him.

But what marks Hitchens out from numerous commentators today is the habit of independent thinking: on any subject from the railways to grammar schools and to the Russia-Ukraine war it is always difficult to predict what he will have to say.

That was true also of the last generation of polemicists which included Gore Vidal or Clive James: the pleasure of reading them was in not knowing what they were going to say. The experience must be contrasted with those numerous columnists on both the right and the left where one can easily guess in advance what is to be said. This melancholy truth is also the case with many politicians, as left and right become harder to distinguish from each other, and as each party’s acceptable ideological band narrows.

At time of writing it isn’t clear how Vladimir Putin’s invasion of the Ukraine will transpire; perhaps it will take decades before we really know. What is clear is that we are witnessing repeated crises and that these seem

to represent a failure of independent thinking. It is enough to make one wonder whether we have lost that art altogether.

Why is this? It is partly due to the busyness of our lives. Who nowadays has the time to acquire the skills to really look at a problem – to assess the available information, to delve into it, to decide which information is worth trusting and which isn’t? They are few. And once those skills have been acquired, who then has the time to be up to speed on the controversies of the day – at time of writing, climate change, Russia and Ukraine, inflation and a myriad others.

The answer is that only a select number of intellectuals and semi-retired entrepreneurs have the bandwidth. One might add that students also have time, and it’s this which makes education such an unmissable opportunity. Many people reach middle or old age and wish they’d worked harder at university – enough to call it a cliché. But there are also those who wish, all too belatedly, that they’d acquired a different mode of thinking in their youth.

Of course, this has always been the basic idea behind a university education – that the young are shaped, as it were, while the clay is still moist. But in this era of partisan media, and of received wisdom, it becomes more and more necessary to always ask oneself whether a writer of an article has sufficient information for what they proclaim,

and whether they have an agenda. It is also helpful to know – as students of history are taught – what primary sources really say about a topic.

That means that it’s increasingly important to seek out those who hold an opposite opinion to oneself on a topic – and to be suspicious if one can find no dissenters regarding a particular point of view. Above all, one should always be willing to pivot if a powerful argument presents itself to the contrary of something which had seemed certain: there is nothing more retrospectively pleasant than to realise you had the flexibility to let a previous false position upended.

The great economist John Maynard Keynes, presented with an apparent inconsistency in his stated positions on an economic question famously said: “When the facts change, I change my mind.”

If such skills can be learned – and they may have to be forged in opposition to the intellectual climate of today’s universities – then the rewards are enormous. The independent thinker is better able to contribute in an original way in the workplace, and to adapt to shifting markets. Since this is now a scarce skill in society, such candidates tend to be rare, and so they also end up as leaders. The best thing you can do at the outset of your job search is to build that capacity within yourself. It will stand you in excellent stead. [f](#)

# War and the Dignity of Work

**When Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin invaded Ukraine he was certainly not trying to reinforce values opposite to his, but this is precisely what war-mongers tend to do. Whenever war commences, we witness both the collapse of the society of the country invaded, but also the eerie continuation of our own lives.**

The juxtaposition between a warzone and our seemingly robust lives in the West is very unfair. It is not uncommon to experience guilt at the chasm between what’s on the news and the comparatively quiet nature of our own lives.

Of course, we must always be careful that awareness of that disparity doesn’t shade into a sort of accidental smugness, even a sense of superiority over those less fortunate. George Orwell deliberately set 1984 in England as a warning that Stalinism too could happen here. But if the spectacle of war doesn’t give us some form of knowledge about the fortunate nature of our own lives then we will probably lack the

courage to defend them.

But in the midst of a job search it is all too easy to be overwhelmed by the stress of the process. It can help to remind oneself that it is a privilege to make your way in a peaceable economy. As Jonathan Cathey observer in our Letter from Bucharest in this issue, the tragedy of war is that it disrupts the economic activity which had defined a country beforehand: one of the casualties of an invaded people, he writes, is “all the things they were doing and all the progress they were making before they were invaded.”

Geopolitical conflict also makes us think about the real purpose behind so many industries – especially those which crop up in discussions over sanctions and strategy. The green industry, as important as it undoubtedly is, has been exploited by Putin. Our inability to frack or create nuclear power stations makes those industries look far more urgent today than they did at the start of the year.

Similarly the banking sector now seems to contain too much Russian money, and one might now think twice before becoming, say, a relationship manager at a top bank if the relationship one might end up managing is an oligarch whose money comes from questionable sources. Likewise, the numerous buying and selling agents in London’s Mayfair may now be wondering if the excellent hand-holding client service which they offered Russian clients was really a decent use of their talents. A young person starting out in life has the opportunity to ask themselves these questions and also perhaps avoid a lifetime of their talents being placed in service to the wrong people.

War is a terrible thing but it has the tendency to make us ask who we are and what we really want to do. It was the former chief of staff to President Barack Obama Rahm Emanuel who coined the phrase which is likely to be his most lasting legacy: ‘Never let a crisis go to waste’. His words seem truer with every passing year. [f](#)

# A Secretary or Middle Manager?— You need to reskill

**Finito World is delighted to welcome the great economist Roger Bootle to these pages – another independent thinker, whose 2019 book *The AI Economy: Work, Wealth and Welfare in the Robot Age* busts a lot of myths around that fashionable topic. “When I looked into the question of artificial intelligence, I realised that a lot of people were talking a lot of rubbish,” he tells us.**

From Bootle’s perspective, the industry has talked up its potential to an implausible extent. But he doesn’t

concede in his inaugural column with us that AI will have an impact when it comes to the so-called clerical class. Bootle cannot envisage a society where we let robots perform our operations or issue us with legal advice, since human beings will, in his view, always gravitate to other human beings in such matters. Similarly, robots are unlikely to be as coordinated or skilled as labourers, meaning that bricklayers and builders have nothing to fear.

However, he tells us that there is a layer of what is sometimes called middle

management which will need to reskill. This is the relatively well paid class of secretaries and middle managers who may soon find that AI does come in and make savings for their employers. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing since such people are often intelligent and able to reskill. At Finito, we specialise in career change mentoring, and have an increasing number of candidates who wish to take create a new life for themselves mid-stream. We anticipate more in the years to come. [f](#)



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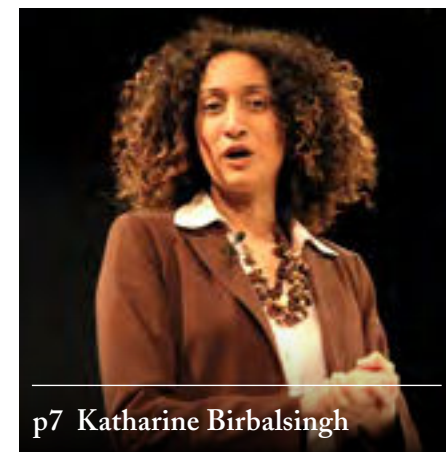
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British Grime Rapper Stormzy (Alamy Stock Photo)



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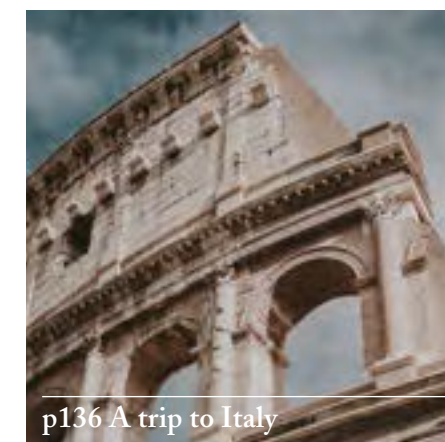
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## Katharine Birbalsingh

BRITAIN'S STRICTEST HEADTEACHER ON TUTORING,  
PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND WOKENESS IN UNIVERSITIES

**I** was at Oxford University and I didn't really know what to do with my life – I only knew I wouldn't really fit in at McKinsey's and places like that. I was involved in an organisation at that time which was about opening up access to Oxford and Cambridge. They would send black students at Oxford to schools with a diverse intake and say: "I'm there, and I'm doing okay." I used to go to schools in Birmingham, Manchester and London and I could see children changing their minds in front of me. I thought: "You can really make a difference." And I've never regretted my choice.

Grammar schools aren't really the gold standard anymore. They take the best and capable kids, but they're not necessarily the best schools. In fact, I'd argue that grammar schools don't have to be particularly good at all – precisely because of their intake. The kids will always do well because they're super bright. At Michaela Community, we don't have those kids – and it's really complex teaching your bottom sets. If you only get the top slice you don't have to think about learning in the same kind of way. If you have a school with real diversity, you have to be doing a great many things to get those kids learning.

If a private school headmaster came to my area, they wouldn't have a clue. That said, there are ways in which private schools can support state schools,

without going in and telling them what to do. They can send some of their students over to do some tutoring of younger children, or they can offer their careers fair to the local state schools to go and join. Or they can send teachers across – these are things they can do without seeming patronising.

All universities are influenced by popular culture. And our culture now is one that's woke – that's the problem. Of course, you might say, "Oh, but that isn't the case everywhere and if you go out somewhere in middle England you can find families who are not thinking that way. Yes, possibly. But the media, the establishment, and all the people who set the tone for the country, are of that mindset. And the universities are also that mindset and perhaps even further along. So it's not even as if you can choose any university you go to, that's what you'll come across. Unfortunately, there isn't anything I can do about that. Really. It's great that there are people thinking of setting up non-woke universities like Barry Weiss in Texas. But it's still worrying. Having said that, if our students have spent seven years with us, hopefully we'll have done a good job of grounding them and giving them certain values.

Often, I think families think that tutors are some kind of magic pill that you take families. And you can tell the tutors come by once a week, they do a bit of

teaching in an hour. And it's something but the habits of learning are created over years on a daily basis. The problem you've got is if you aren't being given the correct work to learn and if you're not being taught properly in essence, it is hard for a family to support the home with that. I could suggest to you online maths programmes that would be far better than any maths tutor because the maths tutor can only do it once a week.

I have to remind parents: it's not just the quality of the school, but the quality of the teachers. Within one school, there is more in-house variation in one school in terms of the quality of the learning that takes place than there is between schools. So families often think: "If I just get them into good school, then that'll be fine". But within that good school, there will be more variety than there is between the good school and the bad school. So even in the good school, you will have teachers that are not necessarily able to teach your child in a way that helps your child learn. Now what is good is if the good school has good behaviour, then that certainly makes it easier for the weaker teachers in the school. f



# Spring Roundtable

THIS EDITION WE FEATURE FINITO MENTOR, AMANDA BROWN WHO HAS EXPERTISE IN SOCIAL MEDIA ASPECTS OF EMPLOYABILITY, AND TAKES QUESTIONS FROM OUR INTERNATIONAL READERSHIP

**I am just out of university and I probably should have done more work experience to date than I have done. I'm concerned that LinkedIn will showcase a thin CV and hurt me in interview. Would you advise I compile more experience before acquiring a significant web presence?**

Katie, 21, Tunbridge Wells

**Amanda** Katie, your question is one which concerns many graduates who have focused on their education and may have had little time to undertake work experience. However, I would strongly recommend that you do not delay completing your LinkedIn profile and your CV under the guidance of a mentor who will be able to assist you in presenting your skills and experiences in the best possible light.

For example, if you have taken extra-curricular activities in the past, these should be added into the About section of your LinkedIn profile. There is also the opportunity to include any volunteering you may have done.

Work experience comes in different guises from internships through to offering part-time help with a charity. Not-for-profit organisations are frequently looking for an extra pair of hands in many different roles.

Scan the job listings on LinkedIn in fields which interest you, and look for the skills and competencies employers are looking for. If necessary, take online courses and skills tests which you can add to your LinkedIn profile. This demonstrates that you are able to show initiative and determination.

Finally, one of the main benefits of having a LinkedIn profile is the value of building a large network with your contemporaries at school and university, family members and friends, who may be useful connections throughout your career.

**There is a company which I really want to work for in the legal industry. I have so far been unsuccessful with getting my foot through the door. Would you advise connecting with relevant people at the company on LinkedIn? What are the benefits and dangers of private messaging?**

Ian, 34, Florence

**Amanda** In the first instance, Ian, I would do as much research as possible into the people and the company you are interested in. Follow their LinkedIn company page so that you are up-to-date on their news. Where relevant, like and comment on posts where you can add value to the content. Avoid



AMANDA BROWN

generic comments such as “interesting post” by contributing your own inciteful observation on the topic.

Check to see if they are hiring currently. If there are no job opportunities listed on LinkedIn, create a job alert and then check the careers page on their website. If there are career openings this may be a welcome indication that the company is growing.

When it comes to connecting with relevant people, I would firstly look at their LinkedIn profile and also whether they are active on the platform. What is the style of their posting? Is it formal or informal? Are their posts strictly industry related or do they share more personal insights? Find something in their profile which you can use to start a conversation. Look at where they have worked previously, their education or even volunteering. If

you share connections with the people you want to connect with then ask for an introduction or mention someone you know well when you send your invitation to connect.

In my opinion it is unwise to open up immediately that you are seeking an opportunity. Accompany your connection request with a short opening message which expresses your interest in building your network with people in the legal profession. Always thank people who connect in a timely manner and follow up with an open-ended question. Communicating on LinkedIn is similar to meeting people face-to-face; adopt the same rules you would if you met in person.

**I am a good writer and had thought about starting a blog on LinkedIn. What are the opportunities and what are the dangers?**

Yasmin, 28, Paris

**Amanda** Yasmin, there are currently two ways you can publish long-form content, akin to a blog, on LinkedIn; namely, LinkedIn articles and LinkedIn newsletters. All members have the article-publishing function which can be found on your home page under the ‘Start a post’ box.

If you have set your profile to “Creator” mode then you may have the facility to publish a newsletter. This functionality is currently in beta and is being rolled out slowly to members. The advantage of publishing a newsletter is that you gain subscribers and when you publish new content, they receive a notification and, more importantly, LinkedIn sends out an email to every subscriber. This increases the potential consumption of your blog.

Care should be taken when it comes to the selection of your topic. I would advise avoiding content which might damage your career, as once published, shared and read, it is difficult to rescind. On the other hand, content which is too generic or already frequently reported will fail to ignite comments.

Be prepared to commit to regular writing so that you do not disappoint your readers. Ask an expert for help in coming up with a content calendar so that you are preparing in advance which helps to maintain the quality of your articles.

**There seems to be a lot of hate online and I am worried about my online presence being somehow a distraction and spoiling my productivity and my mental health. How can I make sure my online presence doesn't negatively effect the rest of my life?**

Robert, New York

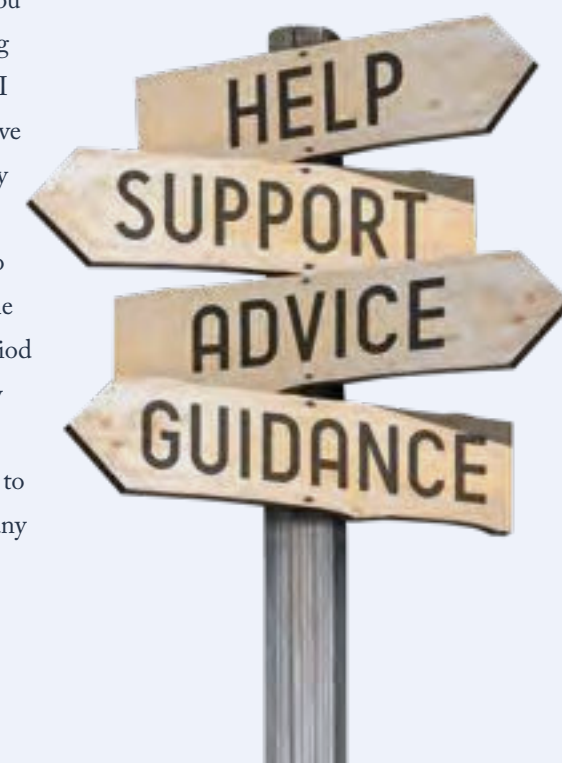
**Amanda** Robert, I sympathise with your experience and you are not alone. If you are finding yourself drawn to spending hours on social media every day then I would highly recommend that you have a digital detox for a period of time, say a week, or at the very least one day a week – maybe a screen-free Sunday to start with. If you really feel taking time away from social media for a long period of time would be too difficult then try placing your phone in another room while you are working so you are able to hear it ring but are not distracted by any notifications.

I would also recommend reducing the number of different social media platforms you participate in.

Studies show that every time you check email, a social feed, or respond to a notification, your mind requires 23 minutes of re-focus time to get back on task.

Another solution is to delete the social media apps from your smartphone and tablets and to only use the browser version. Alternatively, use productivity software which allows you to block websites which you find distracting for certain periods of the day.

Once you have reduced the number of platforms you use, the time you spend on social media each week, removed apps from your phone and taken control of your internet browsing on your computer you will feel more positive and productive. f





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## The CEO Sir Martin Sorrell

THE FOUNDER OF S4 CAPITAL SURVEYS THE GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN 2022 AND FINDS BOTH DANGERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

**While it's true that the metaverse has been thoroughly hyped, I've been listening lately to Bill Gates and others, and it's clear it will have a major impact. One obvious example is the question of work-from-home patterns and hybrid-working. But my sense is the impact will be much broader than that. For instance, I've seen some significant activity recently around training – for instance, the training of pilots and the training of factory processes.**

There's also some fascinating movement on medical processes, and the carrying out of operations. It might even be that metaverse or haptic touch technology will be used to conduct operations. Incredible things are being done and my sense is that from what we've been through in the past years that these things will experience dramatic acceleration. We're on the cusp of massive transformation – and I suspect that what we don't realise is that inflation will also encourage that.

However, I continue to be worried that the pandemic papered over the cracks of Brexit. I hesitate to say that we forgot about Brexit during the pandemic, but its impact was definitely backgrounded, and understandably so. My view is that as a result of Brexit, the UK growth rate has been badly hit and that it will take many years to get that back – and build businesses more like my own S4 Capital which we've built to be genuinely able to look beyond these shores.

To do that you need to realise where the opportunity is. Talking to the forecaster gurus recently has confirmed me in the opinion that the economic opportunities are in Asia – but then nobody will be surprised to hear me say that there are

opportunities in China and India. But I also see great possibilities in East Africa, North and South America and in the Middle East.

By contrast the prognostication of Western Europe hasn't been great. This is why we're looking to increase our activity in Asia from around ten per cent of our work where it currently is, towards 40 per cent.

The biggest problem our clients currently face is the question of what you do in China – even before the Russia-Ukraine conflict, you could have said that the US and China are at loggerheads, even in a kind of Cold War.

It's true that there are glimmers of hope – we're beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel in respect of the climate change question, in which instance China has come on board to some extent. But beyond that, progress hasn't been good and we have to accept that the Chinese are moving in different directions, and increasing their soft power in Africa and Latin America enormously.

All this should come as no surprise. Anyone who has witnessed the Belt Road Initiative – not to mention President Xi's 'dual circulation' economics policy – will know that China is taking a more independent route. COP 26 seems a long time ago now, but in retrospect it's still significant now to consider that neither Putin nor Xi were in attendance. We'll have to see what happens in the Ukraine, and how it will feed into China's calculations in respect of Taiwan, but I think the odds have always been in favour of China following suit in Taiwan.

The luxury markets are worth watching too: premium and luxury do very well in China and I see nothing in the 14th five year plan to counter that. China's growth rate is strong, and will remain strong. I also think it's interesting to note that China is loosening its monetary policy while everyone else seems to be tightening.

America is also difficult to predict. I can't see the midterms going well for Joe Biden and the Democrats. If so, that will mean deadlock after 2022, with the effect that no significant legislation will be passed beyond that point. There have been significant successes: the infrastructure spending was needed, since as a portion of GDP infrastructure had been historically low in the US.

But the bills Biden has passed are by their nature inflationary: going forwards, I expect that if clients think they can raise their prices they will.

All of this makes the world a very interesting place at the moment. There are huge risks out there but I think 2023 will be strong – especially for those who seize the opportunity. [f](#)



Sir Martin Sorrell is the CEO of S4 Capital

## The Economist Roger Bootle

THE CHAIR OF CAPITAL ECONOMICS HAS AN OPTIMISTIC VIEW ABOUT THE IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

**It seems strange to recall now that before the ghastly Covid pandemic descended on us there was a massive obsession in the media and elsewhere about Artificial Intelligence and robots. The conclusion was fundamentally negative. Most people argued that this great technological improvement was going to bring some form of impoverishment: basically, we were all going to lose our jobs.**

I got stuck into reading it all – and found that most of it was written by non-economists. I discovered they had their economics upside down and it was time for an economist to get to grips with it all, which I did. My take on the subject was fundamentally optimistic, so my book stands out from others on the subject.

You've got to start with the history and the technological improvements which have been going on for ages. Since the Industrial Revolution, we've had a wave of improvements which have knocked out various jobs and skills, and in some cases industries. Others have sprung up to take their place. For me, the question was why should AI be any different?

When you got down to the specifics what the pessimists focused on was that essentially there were going to be no areas where human beings will be able to compete with robots. They say that AI will be different as past machines had to be operated by human beings. I looked at that and thought: 'That's bunkum.'

For a start the capability of robots is massively exaggerated in the literature put out by the enthusiasts. Every time I go through an airport, I chuckle at the AI-enabled automatic passport

machines. When they work, they're fine: rows and rows of officials guiding you here and there. When they don't work, humans come into play. If we go onto robots, they've been going on in industry for forty or fifty years but the idea of the omni-capable robot is a long way off. They don't have sufficient manual dexterity; they can't plump a cushion or tie a shoelace.

Of course, those shortcomings could theoretically just be temporary. But more important is the question of what you think human beings are. I quote someone as saying in my book that "the human brain is just a computer which happens to be made of meat." I think that's fundamentally wrong. There's something about the way the human mind works which is very different from the way a computer works: we use instinct and make great jumps which a computer can't make.

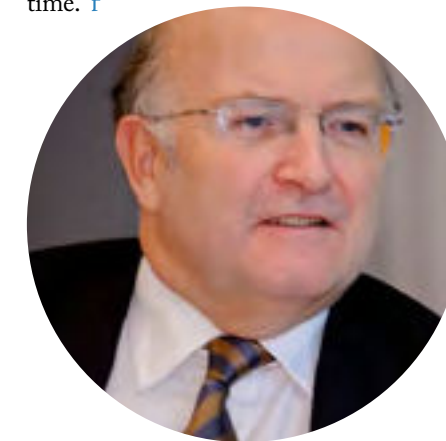
The central thing is that human beings are social creatures and like to relate to other human beings. They're naturally suspicious of machines and sympathetic to other humans.

Take medicine as an instance. Not only is there room for great advances in record-keeping but also in diagnosis and some people suggest this will lead to the redundancy of medical professionals and surgeons. This is complete and utter nonsense. Human beings need to interact with and trust other human beings. You're not going to go along to an AI surgery and hear a robotic voice say, "You've got to have your leg chopped off" – and just go, "Okay." We'll need to have human beings intermediating between us and the robots and AI.

At the moment, robotic surgery has bought some terrific advances but what it hasn't done is make surgeons redundant. What it has done is make surgery much more accurate, reliable and quicker and potentially have it done at remote distances. I see a whole range of jobs where human beings will want to interact with other human beings. There's one thing which robots will never be better at than robots – and that's being human.

Of course, that doesn't mean we're not seeing the more menial tasks removed in favour of robots doing more. Checkout tills are still a nuisance at the moment, but they will get better. Translation is another interesting one. When these translation apps first started they were useless; now they're not bad. Google Translate does a pretty reasonable job. Basic accounting and basic legal services are also possible.

It won't undermine the need for labour for people at the bottom of the heap. It's the clerical positions which will change – people doing administrative and clerical type jobs. I suspect they'll be replaced. But overall, I see it as something which will massively increase productivity over time. [f](#)



Roger Bootle is the Chair of Capital Economics



## The Campaigner Gina Miller

THE TRUE AND FAIR FOUNDER ON THE NEED TO SEE PAST  
POLITICISATION IN OUR SCHOOLS

**We have 167,000 charities in the United Kingdom – that’s a phenomenal number. But we have only one or two parenting charities. That’s a pity because the days of learning parenting from your own parents have gone: the family network isn’t there as it once was. You can’t leave the welfare of children only up to the schools. When they’ve had initiatives in the past such as SureStart it got commandeered by middle class parents even though it wasn’t particularly aimed at them. These initiatives have failed to bring in the parents who really need the support.**

Our schools could be used more as a hub to provide for the people who need assistance. Too many people are stuck in the idea of what a school is for. A school is actually to serve our community – it’s not just about educating people. If you think of it that way, you can utilise schools as a way of teaching in a wider sense. We don’t need to be so narrowly focussed.

Education, a bit like the NHS, has been used as a political football and political parties tend to guard their territory jealously. This is why I propose a fourth summer term. The weather can create a sense of summer school, and volunteering could enter the picture. One charity I know works with ex-service people and they go in and teach sports. They understand that kids can get into mischief. They do phenomenal work – even the most difficult teenager will pull their socks up.

We also have a retiring population who have so much knowledge and experience and who are actually physically fitter than they were in the past. We need to

think more broadly about what happens to them and use the wisdom they’ve accumulated in their lives to better our own children.

That also means we need to broaden and rethink the curriculum. At the moment, the conversation is all around history and how we teach it, but this approach is nowhere near bold enough.

When I speak to the educators and they’re very frustrated. As a result, we’re losing good people in our education system because of the politicisation of our schools. It’s so interesting to me that whenever I speak to a politician about education it always starts from a position of defensiveness. I always say: “What are you defensive about?” I don’t mind which political party they come from. The facts are clear: we can’t deny that we are failing in our educational standards, that we have a low take-up when it comes to further education, or that we made a mistake when we got rid of training colleges. When we got rid of training colleges, and qualifications in plumbing, hospitality, or food and drink, we devalued those professions. Before, when you had the qualifications, you gave those careers standing.

My daughter is 14 and her school is offering coding for GCSE. Only two girls out of 90 took up the task. We have to think about what we’re teaching for. That will go in hand-in-hand with the need to put more resources into life learning as people will change professions at least twice during their lives now.

We used to laugh at Nordic countries, and the fact that children go to school at six and not four. But look at the

statistics: they are much more confident at six. Sending children to school at four is to rip them from their mothers and fathers. If you’re really retiring at 70, what’s the rush? You’re teaching them to: “Don’t cry, be tough.”

Resilience for me isn’t about being tough, it’s about being empathetic and being able to turn yourself to anything and not being rigid.

In a similar spirit, I would also get rid of the 11+ as that’s far too early to be pigeon-holing people. I’d also get rid of the 7+. The narrowness of choice at GCSE level also needs to be looked at. If you don’t do sciences it narrows you, and if you don’t do languages it narrows you – and again we’re locking people into the consequences of premature decisions. I would also argue that projects are much better than exams: the inventiveness required for a history project is a world away from what you get when students just regurgitate facts from memory for an examination. If we could look at all of the above, then we might begin to address the problems of education in our society. [f](#)



Gina Miller is the founder of the  
True and Fair Party

## The Astronomer-Royal Lord Martin Rees

THE ASTRONOMER-ROYAL GIVES HIS PREDICTIONS  
ON THE FUTURE OF SCIENCE

**As the Astronomer-Royal, I would argue that it’s a great luxury to look at the stars – but then the cosmos is part of our environment. It is the unique part of it which has been observed and wondered at by all human beings everywhere in the world’s large history. They’ve all gazed up at the same vault of heaven.**

To be more technical, every atom in our bodies was made in a star which lived and died some 5,000 years ago. I think the public is fascinated by this, just as they are about dinosaurs – which I suppose some people might say are irrelevant now. So I’m not apologetic for trying to understand space.

Besides, space technology is used for practical purposes. By observing things in the cosmos we can study the laws of nature under far more extreme conditions than you could ever simulate on earth: more intense radiation, and longer gravity and so forth, so that one can understand more deeply the laws of nature.

If people ask if there any other special perspectives which astronomy allows me to bring to everyday affairs, it is perhaps the awareness of a long future. Most people who accept Darwinian evolution, they’re aware that we’re the outcome of nearly four billion years of evolution, but I think many think that we humans are the culmination of all that and the top of the tree. No astronomer can believe that, because earth is less than halfway through its life – the sun has six billion years to go until it dies. And the universe may have an infinite future head of it. I might quote Woody Allen who said: “Infinity is very long, especially towards the end.” We are perhaps nearer the beginning than the end of

more and more wonderful complexity, and although that’s a vastly longer time scale than one can easily imagine, it gives a different perspective.

We should share the mystery and wonder of the universe, but we should accept that our brains may not understand the depths of it, just as a monkey can’t understand quantum theory.

Astronomy also engenders humility. Most students find it pretty hard to understand even a single atom. Therefore I’m very sceptical of anyone who claims to have more than a very incomplete and metaphorical understanding of any deep aspect of reality. It’s why I’m suspicious of doctrinal religion, though I do support the social function of religion as a way of bringing people together.

Religion is part of our culture. I was brought up traditionally in the Anglican church, and hugely value the accretions of architecture and musicianship. But if I were born in Iran, I’d feel the same way about Islam, and in the same spirit.

As a writer, I’m very much on a computer. I have friends who write books, who start with a sheet of paper, begin at the beginning and go on. I’m not like that – I write bits and it gradually comes into focus. The books I’ve written have all grown out of having written articles and lecture notes. I would never sit down with a fresh topic and write a book out of the blue.

Most jobs involve some aspect of mathematics and some sort of skill with computers. Science should be regarded as part of our culture. Small kids are fascinated by space and dinosaurs. The tragedy is that as they

get older they lose interest in that rather than broadening it to embrace the rest of science and this is partly due to the lack of inspirational teachers in secondary schools.

Everyone needs to have some feel for science. We need to know how the world works and where our food comes from. It’s sad that there are young people who’ve never seen a dark sky or a birds’ nest or never been on a farm – or couldn’t say where their liver is in relation to their stomach. One feels everyone ought to know a bit about basic numeracy too, so they can’t be bamboozled by statistics. It’s also important for responsible citizens, due to the implications in relation to climate and environment. If you want the debate to rise above the level of Daily Mail slogans, everyone needs a basic understanding of science. For science to be optimised, we need to have a public who understands it well enough to be part of democratic discussion. [f](#)



Lord Rees is the Astronomer-Royal and the  
author of numerous books, most recently *On  
the Future* (Princeton University Press)



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## The Politician Natalie Bennett

THE FORMER GREEN PARTY LEADER DISCUSSES THE STATE OF THE GREEN AGENDA

**What's happened with Covid is that people now realise that the world can change very, very fast. The Green Party has been saying that we need to get to net zero by 2030 and people would always reply that the world doesn't change that fast and you just have to be patient, and it takes time for business models to turn around and so forth.**

But coronavirus changed the world overnight – and changed the world of work too. We now know that speed of change can be a matter of weeks, and also that as a society we have this secret resilience we didn't know we had.

Of course, on top of that we're seeing with horrifying weather events all over the world that the climate emergency is here, and that we can't put our heads in the sand. That's because we can't ignore that the way in which we treat the planet is tied to any notions we might have of prosperity: there are no jobs on a dead planet. We're turning our oceans into a plastic soup, destroying our biodiversity and disrupting the systems which give us life.

There's talk in the climate community about how the virus has helped focus our minds. That's true to an extent. Not travelling frees up time and we save money by not going into the office. All this has benefits for our well-being and we know that travelling makes the air smell less of diesel fumes. We're coming to realise that going green is a win-win policy.

But we've also got to realise that people tend to find change threatening, and we still have got to address the emotions that the climate question raises. People have been through a difficult time,

but those who do react to the climate problem, and seize the initiative are the ones who will be successful, and will lead and be adapted to the new circumstances. In any situation like this, you have the early adopters: society never changes with 100 per cent of society suddenly seeing what we need to do.

Some people still take the approach of what I call 'business as usual but with added efficiencies. We'll carry on doing things as we did them before, but with a bit more renewable in the mix, and some energy efficiency measures, and some conferences.

But the Green Party is talking about wholesale transformation of our society. Take landfill as an example. If you're producing huge amounts of disposable material then that's not a sustainable business model; what we want to see instead is a circular economy without that waste pyramid. It stands to reason that you need to reduce the amount of physical material. We can't change just 10 or 20 per cent; we have to change completely.

I think that has to begin with education. I've been asking this government questions about taking education outside into the natural world, and even about a GCSE in nature. We've been championing that kind of approach; we need education to be for life and not just preparation for exams. We need to look at gardening, and we need to look at cooking.

In respect of the economy, I would regard the Green Party as the natural champion of small independent business. What we would like is strong local

economies built upon small cooperatives – and I can point to examples up and down the country where Green councillors have helped bring that back.

What we don't want is an economy dominated by a handful of giant multinationals or hedge funds who own a bit of all them. That means no competition. I'm a fan for instance of the People's Supermarket in Camden where I used to be a volunteer. That's a different model of local food supplies which we can all learn from.

The other thing we could learn from is the Finnish education system. I remember once I was on a long distance train in Finland, which purely by chance had a children's playground on it for up to six or seven year olds. It was this amazing thing, with little slides and so on and families were having a lovely time on their train journey. I tweeted the photo and I don't think I've ever had such a big response. That's the kind of community-led thinking we need. Let's hope Covid has brought us round to that kind of mindset. [f](#)



Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle is a British politician and journalist



# A Question of Degree



The great portrait-painter Nicky Philipps explains where we went wrong in modern arts education

**My decision to be an artist wasn't really a light bulb moment because my mother, father, maternal grandmother, and paternal grandfather all painted. It ran through the family and when we were little, my mother would make us copy Beatrix Potter figures.**

At that time, I was mad about horses and wanted to paint them all the time. I would look at Stubbs and Munnings, and experiment a lot in both watercolour and oil.

I went one day to see the brilliant horse painter, Susan Crawford who was wonderfully encouraging and said she'd heard about the Cecil-Graves school in Florence. I was immediately interested as I was quite depressed by my experience of British art schools who had virtually stopped life drawing and offered very little structure. I feel their approach has represented an awful decline. Rather than adopting any rigorous training, my teachers used to lay out some object or other and say "express yourselves...." and just leave us

to it. I gather it is much the same today.

This kind of non existent teaching fails to realise that even the most creative and imaginative person may have difficulty drumming up something out of nothing. I suppose in retrospect they were at least facilitating us to draw and paint, but we never had access to top class materials and the whole place was grotty and altogether rather uninspiring. So I left.

That's when I went to Florence and it totally changed everything. Indeed, it is why I became a professional painter. I enrolled at the Studio Cecil Graves set up by two Americans who wanted to keep alive the whole tradition of classical art training. It's interesting that amid all the decline, it should be in north America – supposedly the New World – that the sight-size technique, originating with Leonardo Da Vinci but used most prolifically by the 18th century French academy, has been preserved.

In those days, before you went on to be an apprentice you had to train your eye. This was fundamental and it was done by making the student carry out a series of drawings of plaster casts concentrating on shapes, angles and tone, basically the grammar of drawing. This rigorous teaching was a complete revelation to me and I find it a real shame that the arts education in the UK largely does not rate it. I am constantly asked by young aspiring painters where they can actually be 'taught' to draw and hearing the bitterness of older people who wanted to paint for a living but without the structure to progress their



Nicky Philipps

ability, simply and sadly gave up.

In Florence, the ethos was that you had to draw the plaster cast, exactly as it was. I am convinced that most people who try and are encouraged to look and look and look again would be able to draw an object better than they think. Not once have I encountered anyone who when asked to compare their drawing of an object (a jug for instance,) to the real thing, hasn't been able to point out where they have gone wrong. It's not that they can't see, it's just that when copying, they haven't looked hard enough.

Of course this first stage of cast drawing is only the start and should be followed up by an intensive study of the Old Masters. This encourages an understanding of composition and colour, vital in any successful painting. They were Old Masters for a reason after all.

As a student in London I was never told that Monet and Renoir, and even Matisse and Picasso had actually had a classical training. The feeling was that if one restricted oneself to the 'cage' of



The Duke of Cambridge and the Duke of Sussex



The Countess of Wessex

academic drawing, it would compromise one's imaginative flair and all paintings would look the same. But this seems to me to be nonsense if you compare Leonardo da Vinci and Monet, for instance.

Reynolds wrote in his discourses to his students that it was their duty after the cast drawing tuition, to study the Old Masters and then "to do their own thing." That third part is what makes painters different is why we have Sargent and Seurat, Van Dyck and Van Gogh, Chardin and Chagall, Poussin

and Picasso. All painters with distinctly different styles. There is really nothing wrong with training one's eye properly, and indeed it helps one to better appreciate the world in all its glory.

Almost as important to a young art student is the emphasis on the aesthetic. The Florentine studio was a beautiful oval room in a converted church filled with half finished marble sculptures and plaster casts. A properly paid, good-looking model with a shapely figure would be draped over a huge velvet chair with artistic lighting creating



HRH Queen Elizabeth II

wonderful shadows. By the window would be a student holding his palette as Vermeer and Velasquez show in their self-portraits. I immediately knew I wanted to be there. The atmosphere was fabulous.

I look back and I think how incredibly lucky I was and long to hear that similar processes are once again to be adopted for British art schools. f

*Nicky Philipps is a portrait-painter, especially famous for her portraits of Queen Elizabeth II*



# Relatively Speaking



With Nick Wheeler, CEO of Charles Tyrwhitt

**I was born in Ludlow in 1965, and my mother died when I was five. My little brother was five years younger than me. I also had a brother who was five years older than me, and a sister seven years older than me. Though I was one of four, it was almost like being an only child.**

My father threw himself into his work when my mother died so I was pretty independent. From an early age, I'd do what I wanted. My father would drop me at school in the morning, and then I'd get the bus back. I think there's a high correlation between people who lost a parent early on and those who become entrepreneurs: it's self-reliance and self-belief. You just have to get on with it.

I always hated being told what to do which wasn't great at school. One of my claims to fame is that I managed to get through the whole of Eton without calling anyone sir – that was a pretty good effort in the 1970s. In those days, you had to be subservient. That probably made me quite obnoxious but it did make me independent.

I always knew I wanted to have my own business. My father was a bit of a closet entrepreneur. He did engineering at university and then went to work

for a consultancy group TI Consulting. He moved to Shropshire because his grandmother died and left him a house. He was about 32. Ludlow is a lovely place but not the place where you're going to forge a great career or an entrepreneurial opportunity.

He got a job there working in an agricultural machinery business FW McConnell. It must have been 1963, and about six months after he got the job the man who owned the business got gored by a bull and killed, so my father was made managing director. He grew the business and did a management buyout of another division of the company that owned that business. He owned most of the shares and off he went. He reversed it into a shell company. After the stock market crisis in 1987 the share price never recovered.

I used to go to the business every Saturday morning and open the post with him. I'd also pack stuff on the factory floor and do funny little jobs. Every so often there'd be a cheque in the post and he'd get so excited and we'd do a little dance together around the desk. It was like magic: they'd bring in cheap steel and turn it into hedge cutters. You got paid more for the hedge-cutter than you did for the steel.

There's a similar alchemy with shirts. I like doing things I understand: I'd not be a good Bill Gates or a Larry Page, dealing in algorithms. It isn't tangible enough for me. It had to be physical – like a piece of agricultural machinery or a shirt.

The world is so well set up; there is such a networking of funding opportunities and support. It's a perfectly normal and acceptable thing to be an entrepreneur today. When my father was growing up nobody started their own businesses.

I started Charles Tyrwhitt in 1986 and before that I had other businesses. I ran a photography, a Christmas tree and a shoe business. I was trying to make money doing something I loved. 36 years on and that ethos is still very important. It's making people feel good, and producing clothes which are great quality, and which people enjoy buying and wearing.

A business is a living entity. For me, I want the customers, the workers and the suppliers to love the business.

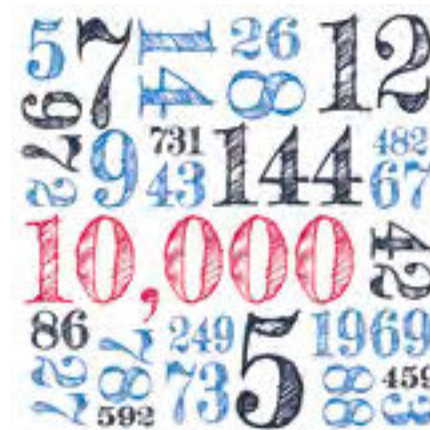
Fashion remains in the family. My daughter bought herself a sewing machine, and she taught herself pattern-cutting and sells them on Depop. In the early days of Charles Tyrwhitt, my wife, Chrissie Rucker, who founded The White Company, used to offer advice. It was great being in the same sort of industry but a different market.

I'm a non-exec of the White Company – she doesn't really have time to take a similar role with Charles Tyrwhitt. She gives me a hard time and says our clothing is too formal – and she's probably right. Actually, we've begun to make our clothing less formal in the last few years. [f](#)



Nick Wheeler is the founder of Charles Tyrwhitt

# Ten Thousand Hours



Baroness Anne Jenkin

**I founded Women2Win with Theresa May in November 2015. At that stage the Conservative party had nine per cent women MPs – I spin it around the other way and say '91 per cent male'. The first thing was to rattle the cage and explain to the Party why it mattered.**

It was just before David Cameron became leader and he embraced it. In his first speech he said: "I want the Party to better reflect the country I seek to serve." Now we've plodded onto 25 per cent. The Labour Party is at 51 per cent but they use all-women short lists.

Besides, Labour has an easier pond to fish in. They have the trade unions and the public sector, and these structures mean that young female candidates are better supported on their journey. Labour also has a far less rigorous system of quality control in order to get on the candidates list.

Women2Win matters because women's life experiences are different to men's. You have to have that different experience better reflected around the Cabinet table, as well as in Whitehall and in Westminster more broadly. I'm absolutely sure that we wouldn't have made such a hash of education during Covid if we'd have had more women around the Cabinet table. That's why I urge senior colleagues never to have a meeting without a woman round the table, and preferably two.

After a recent reshuffle, a senior minister said to me: "I hope you're pleased that there's been an increase." I said: "Yes, an increase of one, and the Cabinet Office has no women in it. It has nine male ministers." They also don't often consider the impact of appointments. I think the Foreign Office has more female ministers than men, meaning they travel a lot. But then there are no women in the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy departments (BEIS), or in Scotland, Wales or Ireland. They need to be aware that our voices need to be heard.

My campaign was to get more women to come forward. The sort of women who would make good Conservative MPs may be on a trajectory to become partner at a firm like PwC. They know if they work hard and do a good job that although it may be challenging, they've a very good chance of making partner, and being well rewarded. We're asking them to move to a risky profession where they may not get selected or then elected – and if they get elected they may well lose their seat. Furthermore, no matter how hard they work, promotion isn't dependent on ability. Not surprisingly they see sharp-elbowed men who know how to play the game differently being promoted and it gets very frustrating – and they leave. That's not always the case, of course: the government is currently busy promoting women ahead of men, which can create frustration in the other direction. Even so, it's not an easy path.

My concern has always been around attracting the right people. In the main from my experience it's about character which you can't define easily. I regret that the party doesn't use our best asset – our people – to show the fascinating narratives of those who do get into Parliament.

I'm focussed on getting more to step forward, and on helping them navigate the maze that gets them into Parliament. That means assisting them with selection, and explaining how to appeal to those are

going to pick you as a candidate. Then I aim to help them once they're in the job.

Finding MPs, however, should really be the Party's job. Famously, Gillian Keegan, who's now minister of state in the Department of Health with responsibility for social care, I met at the theatre. The Party needs to step up and do a focused outreach job.

We really work with women once they have passed the Parliamentary Assessment Centre and are on the official candidates list. We do speech practice, Q&A practice, and we have weekends away where candidates work on their CVs and other relevant skills. We have even included improve comedy sessions, as women can find humour difficult. That aspect is hard for women, who tend to take ourselves more seriously, especially if we're entering public life. We aim to give our female candidates confidence to do the self-deprecating humour.

Theresa May remains our patron, and she comes to things regularly. We had our 15th anniversary last year and she was our guest of honour. She's unlikely to be mentoring people individually as she used to do. She helped that generation of Amber Rudd and Andrea Leadsom a lot. We now have quite an effective group of female Conservative MPs and Peers called the 2022 Committee – she comes to all those meetings, and has made a real difference for young women in the Party. [f](#)



Baroness Anne Jenkin



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# Tomorrow's Leaders Are Busy Tonight



Nimco Ali

**I'm proud to say I'm the granddaughter of a freedom fighter – a man who defended his country against Somali dictatorship. I grew up with a passionate understanding of the rule of law. I was the victim of female genital mutilation (FGM) and this background has given me valuable context for my fight.**

The fact is that there are 200 million people with experiences similar to mine. Some happen to be incredible writers and mentors such as Nawal El Saadawi who wrote about her experiences of FGM in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1977). This book showed me that FGM was not to do with my race or my faith: it was about my gender. There are similar cultural narratives in the UK around domestic abuse. It was this realisation which helped me find my voice.

That book changed me. Being able to have the space to educate myself meant I could understand FGM as part of a broader conversation around FGM: it then became about taking the whole topic out of a cultural cul-de-sac.

What advice would I give to a young campaigner? I'd say you can talk to anyone, regardless of political affiliation. Sadly, because of our first-past-the-post system we have two political parties, and you should always be open to talking to

both. I'd also say you have to make an emotional appeal built around hope and not around sadness.

I've found that it's not just women who are able to hear such an appeal. My message appeals to anybody who has had a traumatic childhood experience – that, in turn, has allowed me to avoid being tribal. That's a legacy also of my understanding of the civil war in Somalia, where tribalism was the problem. I try to find commonality with those in power.

My legal education – I studied law at Bristol – has helped me too. But I think a young campaigner should educate themselves as broadly as possible. The humanity subjects are very important too: history, drama and literature are the foundation of where things came from and where they're going. These things can make you a better activist.

Of the 200 million women affected globally by FGM, most are on the African continent. Another 70 million are at risk between now and 2030. My message to people is that we can save those girls, but to do so we need to invest in women. That means focusing on their education and their employment opportunities; we need to create economic independence in them.

We've sometimes lapsed into an aid mentality which makes Africa unable to go through the Industrial Revolution. Africa mustn't be seen as a poverty-hit continent but as a strategic partner which can elevate itself. That's never been the attitude of the US and the UK. This has created a gap and enabled China and Russia to rob Africa of its natural resources.

As things stand, girls are being raped and murdered instead of being given the power to make choices for their communities. People often don't see the climate change

link here. Of all the places where FGM is rife, 40 per cent is hit by drought or some other global warming impact. Furthermore, if you want to save the elephant or the other big five animals, you have to slow down the population growth in Africa.

China's wealth is built on the manufacture of things it gets from Africa. You won't hear an African leader ever asking for aid: what they're asking for is to change the relationship. Really, they're asking to be a capitalist country and to work for a living and not receive handouts. The trouble is that aid makes people dependent, and that only two per cent of aid actually gets to grass roots women.

In addition to that, our foreign aid giving arm is too scared of being seen as wasting money which means they can sometimes give in a too restricted manner. Likewise, Save the Children and Oxfam have both been in positions where they hold the power in African countries, and they end up abusing that power, and stymie the people they're meant to be helping.

So there's a lot that needs to change. But most of all we need to not define women by their trauma. The first step is to find a new way to talk about the problem – and perhaps that alone would change more than we think. [f](#)



Nimco Ali

# Those are My Principles



With Mohamed Amersi

**Russia's invasion of Ukraine has galvanised the international community and triggered a combination of diplomatic condemnation and economic sanctions, unprecedented in recent years.**

But, despite the formidable international coalition ranged against Russia, we should not make the mistake of thinking that the rest of the world sees the conflict in exactly the terms that we do.

In the Middle East, the situation is more nuanced. On February 28th, four days after the invasion, the Arab League, which represents 22 Arab states, issued a statement that failed to condemn Russia and was lukewarm towards the Ukrainian cause. The UAE abstained when the first UN Resolution condemning Russia's invasion was proposed.

Responses have hardened since then, but nevertheless there remains a body of opinion that the West is guilty of double standards and hypocrisy. Critics ask: are Russia's actions in Ukraine so different from the wars waged by the US and Britain in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya?

If there is to be a diplomatic reset what does that mean for the Israel-Palestine question or the conflict in Yemen and Libya? Why was the same approach not applied to refugees fleeing devastation in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan?

During my career as a lawyer, financier and

entrepreneur, I visited all but one of the 22 countries in the Middle East and Africa (MENA) region. I am concerned that the region is so little understood by the new crop of parliamentarians, even though it is gripped by huge geo-political issues which will return to centre stage and ultimately have as great an impact as Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Sadly, this attitude is not confined to backbench MPs who may not be primarily focused on international affairs. It also appeared to be shared by Boris Johnson's government, and it will be interesting to see what position his successor takes.

Earlier this year, he abolished the Middle East and North Africa portfolio, which at that time was held by James Cleverly, and made him minister for Europe and North America instead. Despite mounting tensions and ongoing wars in the region, the Government does not seem to believe it needs a dedicated MENA minister, merging the role with others in the department. It is too early to tell whether splitting the Middle East role amongst three Ministers will prove more engaging than having a single Minister, given that conflicts in the MENA region are all inter-connected.

That smacks of a "Little Britain approach" and it makes no sense. The potential for further conflicts in the Middle East should alone be enough to make it a key area of foreign policy for the Government. But, in addition, the region is crucial to its ambitions of promoting a 'Global Britain' in the post-Brexit trading world.

With its long history in the region, the UK has relationships which could give it an advantage over other trading blocs, but only if they are deployed judiciously. Yet the Conservative Party currently has no group representing its interests in the region.

The Conservative Middle East Council (CMEC), which was established in 1980, disaffiliated from the Party in 2019, having stayed from its founding principles to foster better understanding of issues in Palestine and the wider Middle East. Instead, it has

become closely aligned to certain Gulf States, raising funds from unknown donors; organising junkets; and receiving payment for its services.

In 2020, I was asked to discuss the establishment of a new organisation fully affiliated to the Conservative Party with the objective of promoting understanding and cooperation between the party and the countries of the MENA region.

My vision for Conservative Friends of the Middle East and Africa (Comena), is as a friendship group which organises exchange visits, lectures and cultural events to promote greater understanding of the region and stronger ties with members of the Arab Diplomatic Corps in London, opinion leaders across the Arab world and with the MENA diaspora in the UK.

The vision embraces the entire MENA region, rather than ignoring North Africa and the Levant. No funding or funders would be allowed to dictate the agenda and the group would exert a positive influence through mutual understanding, co-operation, and dialogue. Promoting peace and prosperity throughout the region would be our goals.

More than 100 parliamentarians, diplomats and Middle East experts expressed interest in membership, subject to its affiliation with the party and complying with its constitution. The UK needs to re-set its relationships in the Middle East and Comena could give this vital work fresh impetus because it would be a new organisation, focused on the region's future, not its past. [f](#)

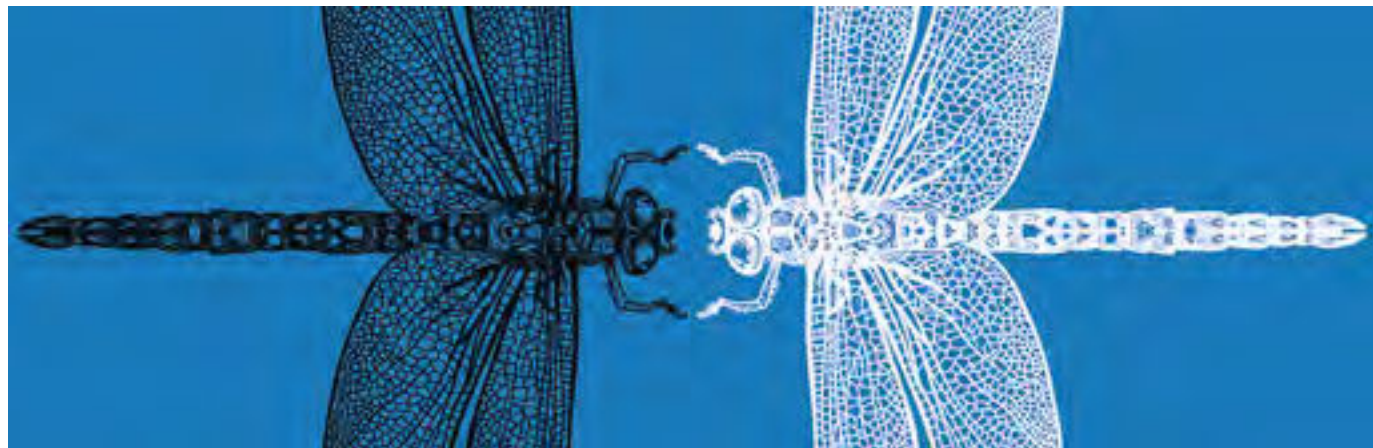


Mohamed Amersi, Chairman,  
The Amersi Foundation



# Waterfly

THE WATERFLY SEES THE REFLECTION IN THE WATER. IT TAKES NOTE AS THE WATER SHIFTS. HERE'S THE LATEST GOSSIP FROM THE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY SECTORS



Emily Prescott



## Emily in Kensington

Finito World's own Emily Prescott has had an exciting few months, moving from her role at The Evening Standard, to become diary editor for The Mail on Sunday. At just 25 this is an impressive achievement. But this isn't all. We also hear that she's working on a book on the history of gossip. When she recently interviewed Michael Gove about diary journalism – Gove, who used to work as Diary editor at The Times – told Prescott that it was 'a nice little apprenticeship.'

But it can be much more than that. Indeed, for Prescott it's been something of a baptism of fire. When she published a piece about Jeremy Clarkson's daughter Emily, and reported verbatim her quotes on Instagram about her ignorance of the Russia-Ukraine war, Prescott woke to find her Twitter had blown up after a fiery – and in *Waterfly's* opinion, unnecessary – tweet by Clarkson himself calling her both a 'shit journalist' and 'an idiot'. But Prescott's good nature ensured that she didn't reply, or even take it too hard. "He's just being protective of his daughter – as I'd be in his situation," she says. Prescott adds with a smile: "I don't think I'm either of those things, but at least I've never punched any of my colleagues." Clarkson has 7.6 million followers on Twitter; Prescott, around 500. So from punching colleagues to punching down – there's consistency there.

## Spectating on Boris

Talking of punching down, one person who doesn't do that,

according to The Spectator art critic Martin Gayford, is the soon to be former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Gayford witnessed Boris up close in his journalism days: "Boris was famous for going up to and over deadline, and certainly did make people quite cross although he probably knew by that stage that he was commanding enough readers to make people put up with it. Charles Moore certainly spiked one or two of his columns and said: 'If he's late, use something else'."

Gayford explains that he didn't always have much directly to do with Boris when he was editor – except in one respect. "One thing I'd say about Boris is that he

Boris Johnson



was unusually good at sending messages to lowly people such as those toiling on the factory floor of the arts pages when he was editor. You would get messages saying, "Boris liked that piece" and that sort of thing." So does Gayford ever see something in Downing Street and think that's a bit like what used to happen at The Spectator? "I'm not sure if you can compare running a country to running a little magazine in a three-storey building in Doughty Street," he says, chuckling. Yes, perhaps not.

Lord Harrington



## Bercow at Bay

Sometimes the hurly burly nature of British politics can be glimpsed in a single phone call. When *Waterfly* called Richard Harrington last year to ask to talk to him, he declined an interview: "You don't want to talk to me – I'm just not interesting enough," he said. "The person you really want to talk to is John Bercow." Since that time, Harrington has become Minister for Refugees and Bercow has even joined the Labour Party. A week is a long time in politics.

## An Ignob-el Mistake

When we spoke with Gayford, we also asked him of his regrets as a journalist. He was decisive in his reply: "The worst thing is when you're

talking to someone interesting, or of historical importance, and you feel you need to contribute something to the conversation – and so you come in with your ten cents. Then you listen to the tape and wish you hadn't interrupted. You've got to keep your mouth shut."

*Waterfly* would add you've got to be careful which day you call. *Waterfly* recalls phoning the Astronomer-Royal Lord Martin Rees last autumn, and found the kindly scientist in an uncharacteristically jittery mood. "I'm so sorry I just have to get off the line," he said. When *Waterfly* did so, we went onto the BBC news website, and saw that that morning the Nobel Prize for Physics was being handed out. Rees had wanted us off the line, perhaps having thought we were Stockholm when we phoned. Oops.

## Goldsmiths aggrieved

*Waterfly* has been in and out of the House of Lords these past few months, and in addition to receiving different appraisals of the food – Baroness Jenkin holds a higher opinion of the canteen than does Baroness d'Souza – *Waterfly* began to get a feel for the place. On one occasion, D'Souza passed Zac Goldsmith smoking a roll-up in the courtyard. "Ooh, I like your cigarette," she said. "You must be the only one," he replied, humorously but a little gloomily.

*Waterfly* recalled catching up with Ben Goldsmith, who told us: "There are many professions which pay significantly more than an MP earns. I think it is a bit much for the public to expect people working in those professions to take a drastic pay cut in order to enter politics. Some may do it, many more would not – and why should they?" And you can't even smoke.

## An Artful Innovation

Emily Prescott isn't the only person in the Finito fraternity going places. Our business mentor Angelina Giovani has made an impressive step creating an innovation in the world of art provenance. "There are a lot of odd and funny requests one gets when working as an art researcher, that can be a dead giveaway as to whether someone is familiar with your line of work or not," Giovani tells *Waterfly*.

Two weeks into the first lockdown in London, an art collector rang Giovani to ask whether she could research his client's 150 artwork collection, which he intended to sell. She tells *Waterfly*: "We certainly can, I responded: "What's the time frame?" "We'd like for it to be done this week." I told him that this was like requesting the Pyramids be built in an afternoon.'

But it was out of this exchange that the Collections Provenance Rating was born. The first of its kind – known as the CPR for short – assesses the state of documentation of a collection and offers recommendations based on the result.

Giovani explains: "This allows collectors planning to sell, insure, appraise or use the collection as collateral and borrow money against its value, to speed up the process and have a new insight into possible problematic pieces. This does not eliminate the need for proper due diligence: on the contrary, it helps streamline and make the research process more time and cost-effective." And that's how they built the Pyramids. f

Angelina Giovani, Finito mentor





# Robert Halfon kickstarts the Finito World Events programme



**The much-loved Conservative MP recently discussed the issues facing education in the country covering everything from the legacy of Covid to the skills deficit**

Finito friends and mentors were treated to breakfast at the East India Club and a morning talk by Conservative MP for Harlow, Robert Halfon. As the current Chair of the Education Select Committee, Halfon is always in a perfect position to discuss the best way to help young people looking forward. He has so far used his role to promote the importance of apprenticeships, and has often had some frank criticisms of Russell Group universities.

The finely decorated room made a

suitable place for discussion, with its intricate moulding which frames ceiling and floor, and historic portraits dating back to the club's foundation in 1849. Those in attendance included Finito CEO Ronel Lehmann, Baron Gold of Westcliff-on-Sea, Myles Stacey, the Special Advisor to the Prime Minister, Professor of Social Mobility at Exeter University Lee Elliot-Major, Chair of Capital Economics Roger Bootle, and numerous other high-profile business and thought leaders.

Amidst a turbulent time for national politics, Halfon accepted the gravity of the cost of living crisis affecting so many across the country. "One of the reasons why there's so much anger is because of the cost of living," Halfon

explained. "The Chancellor of the Exchequer [at the time of the event the position was held by Rishi Sunak] has just spent £37 billion in terms of energy rebates and is providing up to £1,200 to 8 million vulnerable families. But the fact is people are struggling to afford to pay £2000 to £3000 on energy, even with the rebates. They can't afford to drive to work. And that is the reality for millions of our countrymen and women.

Halfon was speaking not just as Chair of the Education Select Committee, but also as the popular MP for Harlow, and he repeatedly turned the conversation back to the issues facing his constituents. Though Halfon has often been tipped for frontline politics, and has launched





numerous successful campaigns during his time in Westminster, the prevailing sense was of a man who has never forgotten the constituents and their concerns.

Halfon continued: “The second issue we face is that there is a view that government isn’t working. I mean you try to get a GP appointment, it’s virtually impossible. You try and get a passport. A constituent of mine paid £150 for a fast-track passport. They were told on the day before that they couldn’t get it, and they were told to refresh the website all the time as if they were trying to book an Ed Sheeran concert.”

Halfon spoke here not so much as a critic of the government but as a supportive voice who realises that all administrations are incomplete and that there is always more to do to support people who need that help. It was in this spirit that he raised an issue which has been close to his heart throughout his parliamentary career: “The fourth and final thing is social justice. Now I’m a conservative, I believe in the free market – and, of course, I believe in capitalism. But we haven’t mentioned the term ‘social justice’ as a party for quite a long time.”

Again, Halfon’s remarks were measured and he took the opportunity to give balance to his remarks: “The government does some very important things, most of which the public don’t know about, such as individual measures to help with domestic violence and to help troubled families – but we need to put forward a coherent narrative.”

Halfon argued that a major part of the social justice issue begins with education, and he continues to argue that Covid has damaged education at all levels greatly. He spoke movingly too about the role of chairing the Education Select Committee, one

which he obviously relishes. “This is the best job I’ve ever had because I am privileged to hold a platform where I can effect real change for our children,” he explained.

So what does he think needs to happen to ensure our young people are work-ready when the time comes? “We have three problems facing our education system. We’ve got the COVID deficit. I was passionately against school closures, and I campaigned against them from the beginning, day and night. I thought that it would destroy our children’s life chances, their mental health, their educational attainment, and create safeguarding hazards and that’s exactly what’s happened.”

Halfon is an important voice partly because he has such integrity: he is always a considered and passionate voice. He continued: “And with the social justice deficit, disadvantaged groups are just not doing well in the education system, and we have this perennial problem of education-based skills deficits. To be fair to the government, they have been doing a lot of good things in terms of the lifetime skills guarantee, the reforms to the Covid Catch-Up programme (based upon the Education Committee’s report), but I think we need a real debate on our national curriculum and whether it is fit for purpose in preparing students for the future world of work and the fourth industrial revolution.”

So what do we need to do? Halfon was clear: “It’s all about knowledge, knowledge, knowledge, and it should be about knowledge and skills. Why don’t we have a wider curriculum where we do a mixture of skills, knowledge, vocational and technical education all the way through, rather than just having the dividing line that we do at the moment? We’re doing an inquiry on that. So the Covid deficit, the skills

deficit, and the social justice deficit.

I would argue that those are real challenges facing education.”

There followed a lively and passionate Q&A. Neil Carmichael, who sits on the Finito advisory board, and previously held Halfon’s post, congratulated his successor on the work he is doing as Chair of the Education Select Committee. Carmichael agreed that the issues set out by Halfon all exist but questioned why economic productivity was left off the list.

Halfon responded: “The productivity answer for me is skills. And my first ever speech was about apprenticeships in the House of Commons in 2010. We need to do more – there are nine million adults in our country who are innumerate or illiterate. I mean, that is incredible. 6 million adults are not even qualified to level two. I do believe in the new Post-16 and Skills Act that has just passed, but we must change our curriculum, promote skills, and get more young people doing apprenticeships.”

There was an audible intake of breath when Sarah Findlay-Cobb, the CEO of the Landau Forte Academy, mentioned that her heating bills for her schools had rocketed from £150,000 to over £1 million in the past year. It was a vivid indicator of the seriousness of the cost of living crisis and Halfon movingly expressed his sympathies.

This was a remarkable event which showed what can be achieved by a good-hearted man in Westminster. As Myles Stacey returned to Downing Street for his daily meeting with the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson he had much to relay. [f](#)





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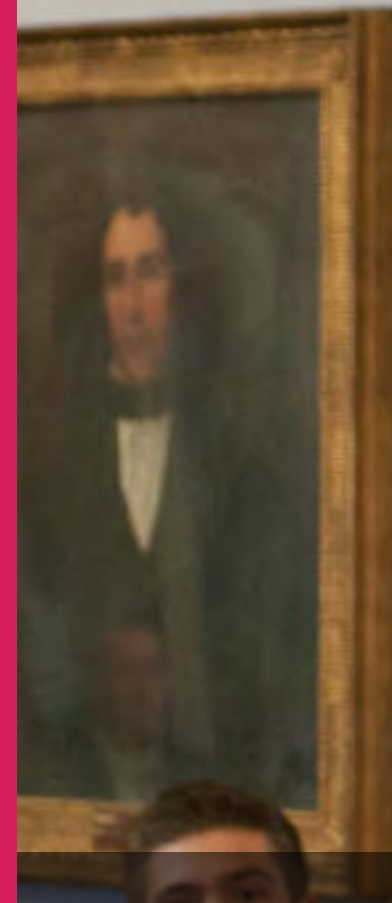
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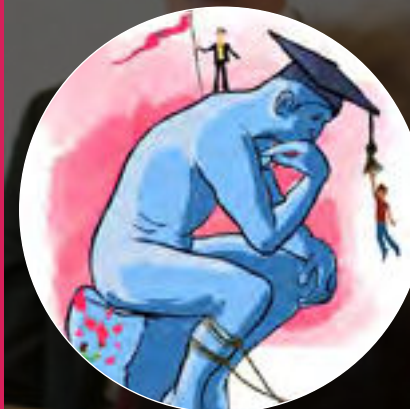
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Exclusive:

# The Inside Story on How Stormzy Transformed the Diversity Conversation in the UK

BY PATRICK CROWDER

**When you think about Oxbridge education, grime music probably isn't the first place your mind goes. Nevertheless, world famous rapper Stormzy looks right at home talking to Cambridge students and professors about his scholarship programme for black students. At six-foot-five, the 28-year-old towers over the crowd gathered outside the historic university buildings on a rare sunny day.**

"Every time I see Cambridge students I always make it a proper point to let them know 'you lot are sick!', but because I'm a rapper, sometimes it can sound corny like 'read your books guys, it's cool to stay in school, kids!' But genuinely, as someone who's tried to be one of you lot, it's f\*\*king difficult! It was so difficult, so I know first-hand."

As Stormzy chats with the students, it becomes clear just how much respect he has for their achievements and what they represent. In his childhood Stormzy, then known as Michael Omari, was a high flyer in school, winning praise from his teachers and earning impressive marks. However, as he jokingly admits, he was also frequently "the one to throw a sandwich at someone's head during assembly".

"I've always considered myself to be very smart, not to be arrogant you know," he explains. "For GCSEs I got all the grades, I got to A-levels and said 'this is tricky',

got to A2 and it was like, pfft. School was a breeze, I smashed my GCSEs to pieces, loads of A\*s, but when I went to college I was like 'wow, this is what it's like actually being a student', and that transition was so difficult."

Like many students who find school easy at a young age, Stormzy became bored of his education and did not develop proper study habits. He and the people around him always predicted that he would earn a spot at one of the nation's top universities, but he blames a lack of focus, complacency, and troublemaking on his failure to get a place.

**"Every time I see Cambridge students I always make it a proper point to let them know 'you lot are sick!'"**

"I did quite alright at A-levels, I got A, B, C, D, and at the time I was gutted but now looking back it's like that's not too bad. But you've got people here who've got A\*, A\*, A\*, A\*. I think when you get to that stage natural ability becomes second to focus, and commitment, and working hard, which is the difficult bit because you get someone like me who went through school naturally gifted, but then it's like... that juice just doesn't work here."

Stormzy was expelled from Stanley Technical High School when he "put loads of chairs on another student" in what he described as "just banter". The administration took a different view – and just like that, his shot at going to Cambridge was gone. Stormzy laughs as he explains how his early perceptions of what it takes to get into Cambridge led him to start the Stormzy Scholarship.

"When I was younger, the reason I thought I could come to Cambridge is because I just thought, 'I'm smart.' I didn't think nothing else. Luckily, I wasn't tainted by what I'd heard from people, like society and that. I didn't even think about my criminal record!"

## The Stormzy Scholarship

Stormzy has an admirable respect for learning – and so, while there's criticism out there about him, it's hard to escape this central fact about him. "As much as people think rappers, footballers, and celebrities are glorified, trust me – learning, education, and reading is a much more powerful and beneficial thing," Stormzy has said.

It is no secret that the Oxbridge experience has traditionally been a white one, and a male one. Together with Stormzy, Cambridge University is trying to change that.

In 2018, Cambridge announced a partnership with Stormzy; the Stormzy



Scholarship. In the beginning, the scholarship supported two black students a year, giving them full tuition and a maintenance grant throughout their time at Cambridge. This year, 13 students have been given that opportunity. The high-profile programme aims to change the perception of Cambridge and make it clear that students from all backgrounds are welcome, and the evidence says that it's working. Dubbed 'the Stormzy effect', Cambridge has seen a massive influx of black students. Between 2017 and 2020, Cambridge saw an over 50 per cent increase in the number of black students admitted to undergraduate courses, and even higher numbers of applications.

Jesse Panda is the President of the African and Caribbean Society (ACS) at Cambridge. He's a first-year engineering student with some big ideas on how to improve the black experience at Cambridge. We asked him about the so-called "Stormzy Effect".

"I think that's an accurate name. I think the support from someone as high up as Stormzy makes black students who want to come to Cambridge feel more welcome," Panda explains. "They think, 'Okay, there's a system for me – maybe I won't get the scholarship, but I can see that they're trying to put a system in place to be more welcoming to black students.'"

The numbers show that Cambridge's efforts to welcome black students seem to be working, but removing a centuries-long stigma is not easy. And, as Panda points out, even with record numbers of black students attending Cambridge, white students still far outnumber them.

"I think the main problem is removing that stigma – the perception that Cambridge is not a place for black students – and, to be frank, it's still got a long way to go," Panda continues.

"I feel that I'm fortunate, but not as fortunate as I could be, if you see what I mean. I'm lucky to not be one out of 40 black students as it was in the past, but now I'm still only one out of 180 black students, whereas a white student will be one out of 2,000 or so."

Removing that stigma is exactly what Stormzy has set out to do. "When we first launched the scholarship, I always said that I wanted it to serve as a reminder that the opportunity is there. If you're academically brilliant, don't think that because you come from a certain community that studying at one of the highest education institutions in the world isn't possible," Stormzy has said.

Jesse Panda and the other members of the ACS are doing their best through events and outreach programmes to show that Cambridge is a place which welcomes black students. However, due to the lack of diversity within both the university and the city itself, Panda says that he understands if some black students decide that it isn't the place for them.

"We had an offer holiday through the ACS, so future students were able to see what the society was doing. It was more welcoming for them, because they could see that Cambridge is not just a space for white people, it's also accommodating for black people as well," Panda explains. "I think we need more opportunities like that because Cambridge is not very diverse. In the media, it is pushed that Cambridge has no space for black people, when in reality there are spaces – but if someone doesn't want to come here because of the imbalance, that would make sense to me."

Despite this, Panda is optimistic about the future of black students at Cambridge, while also realising that there is much work to be done. He is enjoying his first year in the city, and

the ACS has provided a place for him to liaise with other black students and make a lasting change for the future of the university. While Panda's experience has been a good one overall, the lack of diversity is still a large departure from his life in London.

"I think that's always going to be there to be honest. As much as Cambridge is taking steps in the right direction, when you look at Cambridge you still see a white environment. I haven't been as intimidated as I thought I would be, because there are more black students than I thought there would be. But coming to Cambridge from London is still a big jump in terms of diversity."

For Stormzy, the scholarship is a symbolic continuation of his own stalled academic journey and a way to provide an opportunity to students which he did not have himself.

"I actually look back at my school years and say that they're the best years of my life," Stormzy says. "I was reminded by my teachers that I was destined to study at one of the top universities if I wanted to go down that path, but I diverted and ended up doing music so it didn't happen to me. But I felt like I was a rare case in the sense that I knew it was possible, which I feel like is not always the case. When students are young, academically brilliant, and they are getting the grades, they should know that's an option."

### Grime and violence

Having secured a place as a music star known partly as a lyricist, Stormzy's views have often been sought on education. On one occasion he responded to criticism of the message in his music in conversation with Charlamagne Tha God: "You say, 'Let's learn about Shakespeare', but Shakespeare has stories of bloodbaths and murder, so I always say, 'I am as



Stormzy on stage ([wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stormzy))

positive as Shakespeare, I'm as negative as Shakespeare.' Let's get out Shakespeare stories right now and go through them one by one."

Of course, these sort of remarks open Stormzy up to the observation that he has a long way to go before he can be said to display the nuance and poetry of the UK's most famous writer, and some will raise eyebrows at him even making the comparison.

So that while Stormzy's charity work is undeniably a force for good, it can be hard to reconcile this positive impact on young people with the negative impact which his lyrics are often said to have. Grime does not shy away from portraying life in underrepresented communities, which can include depictions of crime, violence, and sexism.

Katharine Birbalsingh CBE is an experienced educator who chairs the

Social Mobility Commission. She is also co-founder of Michaela Community School in Wembley, a free school which has been described as the strictest school in Britain. Birbalsingh takes issue with Stormzy's influence because she sees his lyrics to be glorifying crime and sending young people down a wayward path.

"Yes, some love Stormzy and other drill, grime, rap etc. artists who are misogynistic, glorify violence, wear stab vests etc. They don't care how it destroys the lives of boys in the inner city. They think it is cool. They even campaign to teach Stormzy over Mozart in schools," Birbalsingh tweets.

She later posted screenshots of a conversation between herself and a prison officer who was commending her for "exposing Stormzy as a poor role model" and detailing the kinds of destructive media prisoners often identify with. Birbalsingh adds, "Those of you promoting

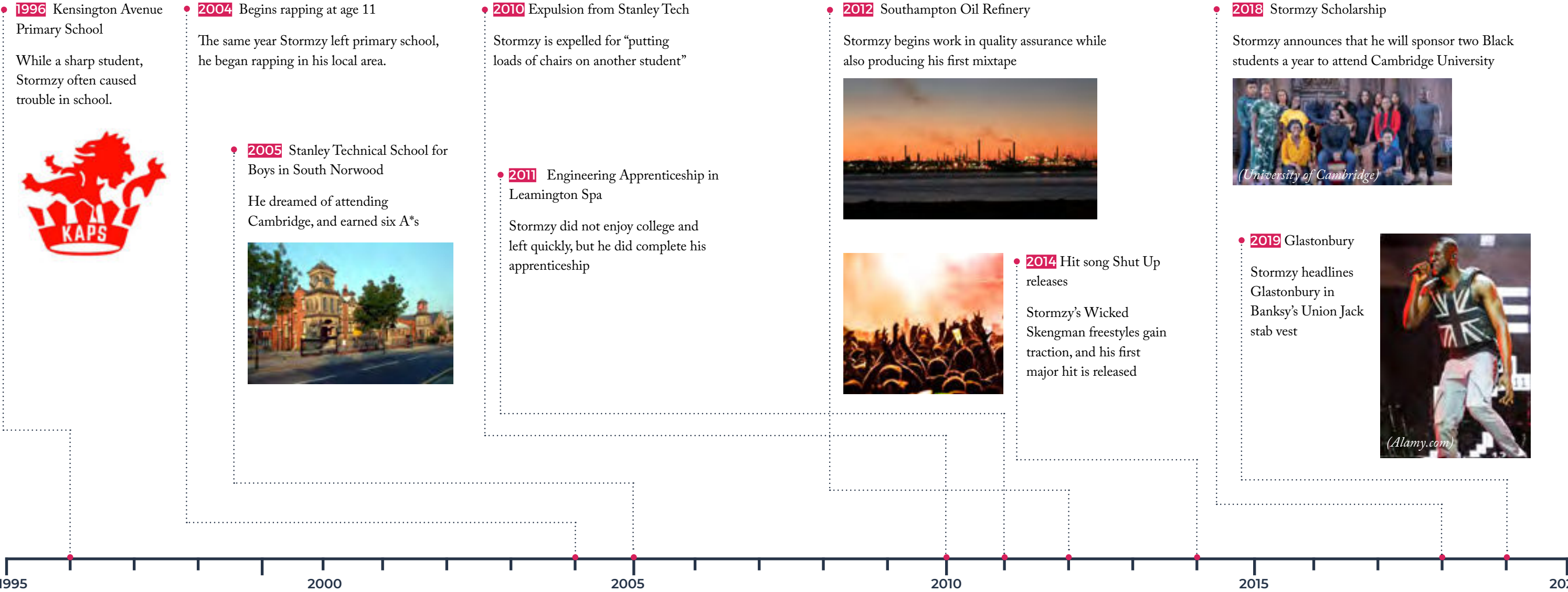
Stormzy have no idea of the damage you do."

**"You say, 'Let's learn about Shakespeare', but Shakespeare has stories of bloodbaths and murder, so I always say, 'I am as positive as Shakespeare.'"**

It is worth remembering that grime is by no means the first genre of music accused of corrupting the younger generation, and it will not be the last. Even Baroque music was initially seen as an ungodly thing – a passing trend



# STORMZY EDUCATION TIMELINE:



which was sure to die soon. In the 1930s, the blues was seen as the musical root of corruption. This view of the genre was not helped by the barbaric attitudes towards race in America at the time, and the fact that it was usually performed by black people. Often slammed as needlessly violent, sexual, and profane, blues was “the Devil’s music” of the day. While accepted as a blues classic now, take the example of Robert Johnson’s .32-20 Blues:

*‘F I send for my baby, and she don’t come*  
*‘F I send for my baby, man, and she don’t come*

*All the doctors in Hot Springs sure can’t help her none*  
*And if she gets unruly, thinks she don’t wan’ do*  
*And if she gets unruly and thinks she don’t wan’ do*  
*Take my .32-20, now, and cut her half in two*

The .32-20 in question is, in this context, a powerful and then-feared handgun cartridge not dissimilar to today’s .44 magnum. So a song released in 1936 was named after a weapon and went on to describe the murder of a woman whose

only crime is disobedience.

Much like in the blues tradition, grime is deeply rooted in the experiences of the artists who perform it. Stormzy has defended the violence of his lyrics on LBC, explaining that the connection between actual crime and speaking about crime is dubious at best.

“The reason why we speak about these things is that these are things which go on in our community. We’re just being social commentators,” Stormzy argues. “But it is such a far-fetched statement to say that grime music is the reason for the country’s knife crime epidemic

– that is wild. How do you even get there?”

When asked if he is careful about what he says in his songs because of children listening, Stormzy makes it clear that he is aware and wary of his massive influence.

“Every time I write a lyric or make music, I have the responsibility and the duty to tell my own truths – whether they’re positive or negative,” The artist continues: “Secondly, now that I’ve progressed to a certain stage, I try to be more careful but I’m not going to put some censor on it because everything I talk about is true. It’s things I’ve done in

the past, things my friends have done, or stuff that we were immersed in, so I have the responsibility to tell my own truth.”

Stormzy sees presenting a sanitised version of his life experiences bereft of uncomfortable, violent imagery as a dereliction of his duty as an artist. An artist’s duty is to tell the truth in an interesting way, and therefore some art must make the viewer want to look away. However, he now also wrestles with his duty as a public figure. Subjects which he once spoke about only to a relatively small audience of people who mostly shared his life experiences are

now being broadcast to the nation. This, Stormzy says, is the root of the issue and could explain the backlash against violence in grime lyrics.

“Things like this are so easy for the public to have an opinion on. Like, ‘Oh my God, Stormzy does grime and he spoke about a gun, he spoke to a murderer!’ but our truth and where we come from is so different. I don’t even expect people to understand,” Stormzy says.

On the topic of sexism, Stormzy is somewhat of a trailblazer in terms of changing the way grime artists talk about women. In 2016, well before his





Stormzy, by Mark Mattock with art direction by Hales Curtis, 2019

Glastonbury performance, Stormzy held a Q&A at Oxford University. When called out on the genre's troubling lyrics about women, he appeared to have an epiphany on stage after initially attempting to defend himself.

"I'm sure a lot of MCs are derogatory towards females but we're not as bad as the Americans. Me personally, I say the odd b-word or 'slut' or 'sket' – this sounds so bad man now I'm saying it," Stormzy says, "I don't know enough to give a proper comment cos I don't want to say 'we're not that bad' when we probably are. But, yeah, MCs stop cussing girls. I'll have a word with the fellow grime massive."

Stormzy felt great embarrassment when his mother asked him about some of his harsher lyrics towards women, which led him to take a step back and consider the message behind his music. Since he pledged to "have a word" with the grime community about sexism, he has stopped

relying on the tired misogynistic tropes once typical of the genre.

#### Portrait of the Artist

The portrait above of Stormzy gazing reflectively at the Banksy stab vest which he famously wore at Glastonbury found a place in the Victorian Galleries at the National Portrait Gallery. I sat down with veteran photographer Mark Mattock, who made the image, to find out more about the process and what the piece means to him.

I meet the photographer at a Farringdon pub called The Eagle – "one of the first gastropubs in the 80s" according to Mattock himself. It was a fitting setting: early in his photography career Mattock took commercial photos of the food at that very same pub. Now, he returned to tell me about the difficulties and triumphs which went into creating the famous image. The first hurdle

was scheduling, but Mattock says that his experience taught him not to be surprised by Stormzy's late arrival.

"You have to be prepared for the situation you're going into," Mattock explains. "Stormzy was late, which I knew he would be, I knew he would come in at three in the afternoon, not ten o'clock in the morning."

When Stormzy arrived and they began the photo shoot, realising the vision of the piece did not come easily. It wasn't until Mattock sat down for a one-on-one with Stormzy that things began to come into focus.

"There were all the ideas that I was told, but I realised that they weren't really coming from him. I remember on the day I could tell that he wanted to portray something, so it came down to just shooting and photographing him looking down at the stab vest, and I knew that every photo would look very nearly the same, but there was something subliminal he was looking for," Mattock says. "There came a point where everyone was frustrated that it wasn't happening. Stormzy and I sat down for a quick chat and he got a piece of paper, drew a square and a simple illustration of him in that frame, and said 'I want it to look like that'. Then we added the other elements, the Glastonbury vest, and everything else."

After settling on a clearer direction, Mattock was able to bring in the elements which make the portrait so potent in its setting. Through classical imagery and elements of British cultural iconography, the portrait was transformed into a piece which almost subliminally causes the viewer to ask questions of history, race, empire, and royalty.

"The idea was that it would feel like a Renaissance painting. It began with having a Tuscan stormy sky in the back,



Stormzy portrait at the National Portrait Gallery, London

and I worked a lot on that before it became the green background. And it's almost a British racing green, so there are still subliminal elements to it," Mattock says, "It looks Renaissance, but it's also about the British green. The crown was added digitally, and I think it came out really well. It took a lot of tweaking to get all the exaggerations and nuances which make it look like a painting right. It's not a single image, it's a combination of five images."

The final product took incredible skill in composition, vision, and digital manipulation. But for Mattock, the significance comes not from the process or the final image, but from its placement and the context surrounding it.

"I'm proud of it because of the National Portrait Gallery. It's not about the work, it's about the social statement being made, and that's what I'm really proud to take part in. When I went to see it, it just became really obvious what we'd done here. It sits in a wing of the National Portrait Gallery of all the so-called greats of Britain. The only other Black person depicted in that whole wing of supposed British greats is Queen Victoria handing a Bible to a Kenyan noble. And you realise the

potency of the statement made – it wasn't quite a brick thrown through the window, but it's the whole language of it, and that's what was really important."

Stormzy says that it is "nothing but an honour" to have his portrait hung "in a gallery which exhibits so many incredible portraits of those from British history." As a champion of black British culture, it should come as no surprise that Stormzy is happy to see the National Portrait Gallery representing a black artist.

**"It's not about the work, it's about the social statement being made, and that's what I'm really proud to part in."**

For the National Portrait Gallery, Stormzy's portrait represents a shift towards a more contemporary approach to representing major figures in Britain's history and culture. I spoke to Dr. Sarah Moulden, who is the curator of the Victorian Galleries, to learn more about the reasoning behind the decision.

"We were really interested in representing Stormzy in the gallery after his Glastonbury performance, and right before Heavy is the Head came out. When we were working with Atlantic records, there was a conversation about where it should go in the gallery, and we were quite clear that it should go in a historic gallery," Moulden says, "We wanted to broker this interesting visual and conceptual conversation between new and old portraits, so we agreed that the most meaningful place to do that was the Victorian Galleries. Particularly, we wanted to place the portrait in the statesman's gallery, which is mostly populated by white male Victorians. That juxtaposition provided visitors with a place to stop and think about the legacies of empire and colonialism, and the impact of people of colour on UK society."

The painting of Queen Victoria and a Kenyan noble which Mattock referred to is titled "The Secret of England's Greatness". The now uncomfortable painting is not actually the only depiction of a Black person in the Victorian Galleries, but it is certainly the largest and most prominent. Moulden describes how, during his visit, Stormzy was drawn in by a different portrait of Croydon-born mixed-race composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor.

"He's such a humble person – a towering, but very humble person, and it was so interesting to see him and his team flock to that portrait of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. It shows that oftentimes it's about seeing yourself in the galleries. Many visitors come through the door and say 'I can't see myself represented here', and that's what we've taken onboard," Moulden says. "But seeing Stormzy and his team walk through the gallery and zero in on this one small portrait among a sea of stale, male, dead, white, heads is just another example of seeing yourself in the gallery."



Stormzy performing on stage ([wikipedia.org](https://www.wikipedia.org))

Yes, we have gaps in our collection and we have to deal with that, but we can be clever about it, we can do interventions, and we can think about using different media as well.”

When the portrait went on display near the end of 2019, people flocked to see the new addition. Unfortunately, the NPG closed for the pandemic and began renovations, but visitors will be able to return in Summer of 2023.

#### Tear Him for his Bad Verses

Asked if he has a favourite line in his songs Stormzy doesn't miss a beat when talking to *The Fader*: “My favourite line is: ‘All my young black kings rise up/ Man this is our year/ And my young black queens right there/ It's been a long time coming I swear.’ [the lines come

from his song ‘Cold’]. I just love the fact that I can say that on the tune, and it can resonate... with that one message it becomes bigger than me.”

An oft-quoted fun fact states that the word “rap” comes from the combination of the words “rhythm” and “poetry”, which is a nice, believable explanation. The actual etymology of the word most likely stems from the word “rapport” or “repartee”, with the “rap” we know today emerging from hip politically active circles in the 1960s, where it originally referred to quick-witted oration rather than music. No matter the term's actual roots, perhaps “rhythm and poetry” is a good definition for rap, rather than an origin story. Since the earliest rap artists hit the scene, there has been a debate over whether the often witty, well-constructed lyrics can be considered

poetry. I put this question to Todd Swift, former writer-in-residence at Pembroke College, Cambridge. His answer? Of course rap is poetry, and the debate should have been settled a long time ago.

“The debate about whether or not song lyrics are ‘literature’ or ‘poetry’ – or not – should have been laid to rest after the Bob Dylan Nobel Prize, if not after the ubiquity of Leonard Cohen’s ‘Hallelujah’, which is sometimes voted the greatest song ever written. Of course, in this age of constant social media unrest, and very divided political and aesthetic sensibilities, such debates continue, though very few but the rudest or most obtuse of critics would now consider denying the power and style of ‘rap lyrics, for instance.”

So will Stormzy be studied in the future? Swift is confident he will be: “By the standards of lyrics/poems currently taught in schools and universities, awarded prizes, published, anthologised, and performed and recorded, Stormzy is a canonical author. Why wouldn't he be?”

So there it is. Historical context shows that rap and song lyrics are absolutely poetry – even Shakespeare's poems were often sung. We've established that Stormzy writes poetry, but does Swift think that it's good poetry? I sent him the lyrics to “Crown” off of Stormzy's latest album to find out. We've reprinted a brief selection here for context.

*Amen, in Jesus' name, oh yes I claim it*

*Any little bread that I make I have to break it*

*Bruddas wanna break me down, I can't take it*

*I done a scholarship for the kids, they said it's racist*

*That's not anti-white, it's pro-black*

*Hang me out to dry, I won't crack...*

*Searchin' every corner of my mind*

*Lookin' for the answers I can't find*

*I have my reasons and life has its lessons*

*I tried to be grateful and count all my blessings*

*But heavy is the head that wears the crown*

“In this lyric/poem by Stormzy, a lot is at play – from the mid-line caesura, somewhat Beowulfish, establishing contracts and multiple options (‘any little bread that I make I have to break it’) – with the brilliant bread/break rhyme, and the many types of ambiguity, money, biblical prayer and ritual, comingling in the song's Christian themes – the poem is a re-enactment of the manna from heaven versus Mammon from the earthly cities conflict which humans encounter. Or, the secular and the divine tussle,” Swift says.

Swift continues: “As he says: ‘two birds with one stone’ – the song will explore the challenges of his business and his spiritual paths, as a successful black man. The poem is rich in irony, actually: ‘Gotta stay around but make a comeback too’ is both a comment on the Jesus of the text, and the business model Stormzy is wrangling with.”

It is worth pointing out that not all scholars of poetry will agree with Swift's analysis, however he makes it clear that there is a significant amount of substance within these lines. The complex biblical and literary allusions should prove to even the strongest of critics that grime can be about a lot more than drugs and violence. And, as Swift says, in the context of Stormzy's music such criticism holds little meaning.

“Even Northrop Frye would have to admit, this single song has as many references and allusions as almost any canonical Judaeo-Christian poem by

John Donne, besides which it has the advantage of being post-colonial and post-canonical, re-saying and re-inscribing these images and themes for a contemporary, young, black audience. He is not anti-white, the text says, but ‘pro-black’,” Swift explains. “Of course, this commentary is rendered both archaic and unnecessary on arrival, given the lyrics are well-prepared for any white scholarly guff that may be thrown its way: ‘don't comment on my culture, you ain't qualified’. As the poem says: ‘Amen’.”

#### Grime, Live!

For people who don't follow grime music, Stormzy is perhaps most famous for his appearance on the Pyramid stage at Glastonbury 2019. While he had a significant following before, this was a major turning point in his career, and his performance is widely considered to be Glastonbury history. In hindsight this may seem ridiculous, but at the time Stormzy thought that he had completely blown it. “Onstage it was the worst thing ever. After about 20 minutes my sound blew and I couldn't hear nothing... I came off stage bawling my eyes out,” Stormzy says on *The Jonathan Ross Show*. Thankfully, he was convinced by the recording of his performance, saying, “When I watched it I was like ‘Thank God! I can't believe this actually went well!’”

Grime has long been fraught with controversy, both over violence and drug references in lyrics, and over the genre's potential sticking power. In 2018, the BBC had already published an article asking if grime was dead. For me and 1,999 people at the sold-out O2 Shepherd's Bush Empire on the 11th of May, grime was alive and well.

I don't have a background in grime music – in fact, I'm relatively unaware

of the modern music scene compared to my friends and colleagues. You're much more likely to find me at folk gigs and dad rock shows than at any of the big festivals, but I can enjoy just about any kind of music if I'm exposed to it. That's why, when researching this piece, I started listening to grime and liking what I heard. In fact, I came to the conclusion one Friday evening that I couldn't honestly write about a genre without going to a show myself. Luckily, Tottenham-born rapper and grime giant Chip had a show booked for the following week.

The Shepherd's Bush Empire is an ideal venue for bands and solo artists. It's large enough to attract big names, but small enough that you don't need binoculars to keep track of the performers. For Chip's show, I opted for the standing tickets, which ended up being an excellent call. I must admit that I arrived with a little bit of trepidation. For the past week before the show I had been reading commentary about how violent of a genre grime is and the danger of the imagery, so I had no idea what to expect. I am happy to say that if Katharine Birbalsingh wanted proof that grime is not all about violence, she would have found it at this show.

I walked in at the opening time – 7:30 – in a show of punctuality and complete unawareness. Little did I know that Chip wouldn't be coming on until 9:30, and the fact that I cruised through the line with ease didn't tip me off either. However, I'm glad that I arrived early, because it gave me a chance to scope out the venue, take in the opening acts, and meet some fine folks. Contrary to the image which is often portrayed of grime music and its fans, everyone I met was extremely nice even though I looked very out of place. I dress like a 1970s dad who's taking his kids camping in Yosemite most days, and that day



was no exception. If there had been any meanspirited energy in the crowd, I would have been an easy target, but almost immediately I found myself making friends.

While looking around I saw busy lights, modern looking bars, but also charming turn-of-the-century scrollwork which reminded the audience that the place was built in 1903, and large analogue clocks with illuminated signs reading “TRANSMISSION” and “REHEARSAL” harkening back to the days when the venue was still in use as the BBC Television Theatre. But beyond the venue itself, the thing which struck me most was the amount of people required to put on the show. Everyone thinks of the musicians themselves, but becoming an artist is a far less secure way to make a living than the myriad other jobs available in live performance.

Daniel Maitland is a lifelong musician who both writes original music and teaches students a number of instruments. His career may lead you to believe that he thinks music is a very good choice to make a living, but he takes a more realistic view when it comes to achieving great fame, or even earning decent money in the industry.

“I think there's a danger. The truth about pursuing music is it will give you a more interesting life, and you'll have more adventures than you would if you worked in the post office, and you'll have a vocation which is a comfort when times are hard - but you almost certainly will be poor,” Maitland says, “Most working musicians never got the capital together to buy a house, so they don't have any security. That's kind of the trade-off, you live hand to mouth.”

Following one's dreams is an admirable thing, but as Maitland describes, it is not practical to think that music is a surefire way to make a career, or to get out of

poverty. From security and bar staff to lighting designers, sound engineers, and managers, there are many different people who create the atmosphere required for a stellar show. Live sound engineers have the extremely important job of making sure that the performer can actually be heard. They can make up to £40,000 a year with experience, so that's a solid career choice for those with a passion for music and performance.

Events promoters who take charge of marketing for a gig can make around £30,000 a year, depending on venue, frequency of events, and experience. Booking agents often charge 10-20% commission for an event, so their salary completely depends on how big of a gig they're booking for. Their job is to find people like DJ Ironik, who warmed up the crowd at Chip's show.

DJ Ironik's set got the crowd in a good mood, which didn't take much considering reasonable drink prices and a strong feeling of anticipation in the air. The tunes were accompanied by a large screen displaying 90s bowling alley style graphics of CRT televisions, tumbling dice, flames, and at one point spinning igloos in a snowy arctic outpost.

When Chip took to the stage, the crowd went crazy – but that cheer was nowhere near as loud as when Chip announced that his parents were in the crowd, with good seats on the second level. He launched into his set, starting with some of his older songs, then moving on to selections from his new album “Snakes and Ladders”. He has an energetic stage presence, assisted by a mastery of the mic and a mix engineer who made it clear there was no lip syncing going on. This was pure performance, and thanks to the work of everyone involved in the process, we were all loving it. What struck me most was the sense of community – not based on racial or social constructs but based purely on

love of the music. Everyone was there to have a good time, and if you were there to have a good time too, then you were part of the furniture.

### The Rags to Riches Myth

So how do artists like Chip and Stormzy make it to the top? These stories of rising from hardship to have a following on the world stage are inspiring, but is it practical, or even healthy, to tell young people that the same thing can happen to them?

To find out the connection between music, social mobility, and education, I also spoke with Lee Elliot Major OBE, who is the nation's first Professor of Social Mobility at the University of Exeter. He is quick to warn that, as a rule, most people don't 'make it' to the same level as people like Stormzy, and he stresses that more help is needed to make the music industry more accessible to people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

“Stormzy is a great exception to the rule, of course, and it's interesting that he has kind of very publicly – generously, in some ways – committed to help people. It's interesting that he's chosen Cambridge for his scholarship. It's great to try and help kids get into Cambridge, but arguably we need more support for young people to get into the music industry,” Major argues. “One of the dilemmas Stormzy will have, and a lot of artists suffer from this, is that the working-class credentials and background you have which made the songs authentic to begin with gets lost as you become successful. What do you write about when you are suddenly rich and middle class, to some extent? You see this in many older artists, that's part of the age, you're just not as young and maybe in tune with some of the younger generations. But another big part of it is also your class, right? You're

Stormzy on stage during day one of Capital's Jingle Bell Ball 2019 (Alamy Stock Photo)



just not experiencing the same real-world experiences that other “normal” people will be experiencing. So it'll be interesting to see how Stormzy evolves, and whether he retains that authenticity that he currently has.”

As artists gain fame, they often can become detached from their audiences simply because their lives begin to bear no resemblance to the everyday struggles which once provided inspiration. For Stormzy, fame has shown him a different side of life – a side full of people incredulous at his success due to race. “You can tell they think I'm not supposed to be here,” Stormzy has said, referring to his experiences at high end establishments. “I'm going to live where I live, I'm going to have my hood up, wear all black, and I'm going to be in a first class lounge, or in this mad restaurant, or in this posh hotel and be like, ‘Oh, you didn't think young black people could be here?’”

Whether Stormzy is going down the path of disconnection with his audience is yet to be seen, but for now, Major argues that he has more

influence over young people than top politicians. I showed him these lyrics from the song “Crown” off Stormzy's album H.I.T.H.

*All these fancy ties and gold plaques*

*Never had no silver spoons in our mouths, we sold (crack),*

*Don't comment on my culture, you ain't qualified*

*Stab us in the back and then apologise*

*If you knew my story you'd be horrified*

*The irony of trappin' on a Boris bike*

**“Never had no silver spoons in our mouths, we sold (crack).”**

Major replies: “I would argue that one of the main problems with low social mobility is that we have increasingly detached elites, both in the US and the UK. And that's not a political point. Whoever the political leaders are, because they come from quite

privileged backgrounds, they really do not understand where some of the young working-class people are coming from, so those sort of lyrics speak to that,” Major continues. “And Stormzy has more power, in many ways, in terms of influencing the young generation than politicians could ever have, because they're just kind of out of touch with normal people. There's two dimensions to this - one is that they come from very different social classes, but there's also a generational divide as well which I think is very strong now.”

Young people often take inspiration from celebrities, and that's not always a bad thing. We frequently hear “follow your dreams” from people who actually mean “follow your dreams but limit your expectations”. The issue is one of scale. Yes, some people will go from disadvantaged backgrounds to becoming superstars, and there's no reason not to try and make it big. However, programmes designed to increase social mobility must be further reaching than that in order to help a larger number of people. Major argues that Stormzy



represents a type of success which only happens to a select few and offers some alternatives to affect more widespread change.

“The problem with this is that it’s almost the American Dream version of social mobility, which is very powerful, but very dangerous. And the reason for this is that only very few people do make that incredible journey. You get the same thing with elite sports, when we see the premiership players, some of whom come from working class backgrounds, who are earning incredible amounts. Now, that’s a combination of talent, work, luck, etc. and that certainly is not the case for everyone. So I worry about narratives of social mobility that are very narrow around that kind of rags to riches transition,” Major says. “Cambridge is an incredibly prestigious, elite institution. It’s a wonderful place, but very few people go there, right? If we really want to improve social mobility more generally, then we have to try and help those kids who don’t go to university. So we’re talking about apprenticeships, we’re talking about local jobs, and those sorts of transitions are really important in the social mobility picture.”

Former Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan believes that the key to promoting social mobility is starting from a young age. With a focus on a return to pre-pandemic norms in the classroom and an increase of degree-level apprenticeships, Morgan says that social mobility can be greatly increased.

“Education is one of the greatest engines of social mobility and there are still too many students of all ages not getting that opportunity to change their lives through a great education,” Morgan says, “Ensuring that higher education is clearly open to everyone, including broadening the diversity at our top universities is important – but with the growth of apprenticeships this is becoming more finely balanced,

and the opportunity to do degree-level apprenticeships needs to be more widely known. Post-pandemic ensuring that the focus on high standards at schools and face to face teaching at universities are restored as quickly as possible are vital to ensuring greater social mobility.”

The Stormzy Scholarship is certainly seeking to achieve the goal of “ensuring that higher education is clearly open to everyone”, and at Cambridge the scholarship is driving a change. However, the strides being made in educational racial equality by Stormzy’s scholarship are currently only present at the highest level of university education. Based on Morgan and Major’s advice, perhaps the best way for Stormzy to increase social mobility would be to sponsor degree-level apprenticeships and raise money for early education in underfunded schools, alongside his high-profile Cambridge project.

The question of Stormzy is a complex one. On the one hand, there’s no doubt that in reflecting his own life experiences and those of the people around him Stormzy has produced lyrics which are at times unsettling. For Birbalsingh, the messages found in some of Stormzy’s lyrics are enough to warrant a full condemnation of the artist. But this is more than offset by what he has achieved at Cambridge, as shown by my conversation with Panda. Yes, the Oxbridge experience has a long way to go before it can be hailed as truly all-inclusive, but it is clear that Stormzy is helping to end the stigma surrounding elite higher education institutions by showing black students that there are systems in place to help them in what could be an uncomfortable environment.

Part of what makes the image at the National Portrait Gallery so interesting is that Stormzy isn’t a straightforward figure. His influence on British culture is undeniable, which is why the National

Portrait Gallery chose to include Mattock’s striking portrait. Mattock and Moulden’s pride in being a part of the changing direction of the National Portrait Gallery shows that the portrait of Stormzy is not only evidence of his cultural influence but is in fact yet another example of his power to shift longstanding norms.

“It is clear that grime is both art and poetry.”

Todd Swift has assuaged any doubts I may have had about the lyrics. While not everyone will agree with the Shakespeare comparison, it is clear that grime is both art and poetry, both of which have always taken on new forms over the years. But Stormzy’s story also reminds us that we have a long way to go in terms of social mobility in this country, as both Major and Morgan explain. Without programmes which help a wide range of people from disadvantaged backgrounds, social mobility will continue to stagnate, and the rags-to-riches elevation of just a lucky few will not solve the problem. To this writer, Stormzy is an artist who is trying in his own way to use his platform for good. He recognises the weight of his role, he’s attempting to correct past mistakes, and he’s making commitments to help young people for the future. For someone who became a household name at 23, Stormzy is handling the pressures of his success far more gracefully than most.

Nobody should think that a career in music is easily achieved. On the other hand there is no doubt that Stormzy is an example of what is possible with talent, hard work, and yes, a little luck. **f**

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# Have we Lost the Habit of Independent Thought?

CHRISTOPHER JACKSON LOOKS AT THE QUESTION OF WHETHER WE INHABIT AN AGE OF CONSENSUS – AND ASKS WHETHER THERE'S ANYTHING WE CAN DO ABOUT IT



**O**ur cities are so far advanced down a misguided aesthetic that even revolutionary projects must be undertaken in bad architecture. Michaela Community School is located opposite Wembley Park tube station. Adjacent to a ring road, its surroundings feel like a testament to generations of bad urban planning linked to the demands of the car. Despite this you somehow suspect that Michaela Community is revolutionary before you're even through the gates.

Our cities are so far advanced down a misguided aesthetic that even revolutionary projects must be undertaken in bad architecture. Michaela Community School is located opposite Wembley Park tube station. Adjacent to a ring road, its surroundings feel like a testament to generations of bad urban planning linked to the demands of the car. Despite this you somehow suspect that Michaela Community is revolutionary before you're even through the gates.

Even amid the squalor, banners proclaim central Michaela precepts: 'Work Hard', 'Be Kind', 'Top of the Pyramid'. It also reminds you of its excellent results: "Ofsted rated Outstanding. Over 75% to Russell Group Universities including Oxbridge, LSE and Imperial." These messages feel somehow incongruous when set alongside the mess we have made of this part of North London.

Inside the impression of difference sharpens: you know straightaway this isn't a normal school. You are greeted by examples of the children's excellent artwork, including portraits of David Cameron, Queen Elizabeth II and Boris Johnson. Newspaper clippings detail the visits of dignitaries and interviews with Michaela's Headmistress Katharine



Katharine Birbalsingh

Birbalsingh, Britain's so-called 'strictest headmistress'. Lauded by the right, and despised by the left, Birbalsingh has done a difficult, almost unprecedented, thing: she has acquired fame as a teacher.

As I am escorted up to see her, I am aware of a mood in her administrative team which doesn't usually accompany my visits to schools. It is, in fact, the sort of awe which surrounds rock stars and Cabinet ministers. And yet the respect surrounding the headteacher has a distinctive strain often absent in those other cases: it is genuine love and respect.

In place of the usual din of schools – places which are usually full of vaguely located cries, as in a shopping centre – at Michaela there is only the hush of concentration. Famously, Birbalsingh has created a regime where there's no talking in the corridors and students regularly submit to having their mobile phones put in storage to aid their learning.

As I walk on up to Birbalsingh's office, I walk past a group of children moving between lessons. They remind me of contented nuns and monks shuffling through a cloisters. One looks up at me and offers a wry smile. In the

context, it's subversive – a moment of independence within a strict regime.

I will find I like the school a lot. What has been achieved here is beyond doubt. But I think afterwards about that boy with the smile. It feels emblematic of the independent streak.

## Blair and his Heirs

Independent thought, it might be said, hasn't had a particularly illustrious 25 years. It is now a quarter of a century since Tony Blair came to office and proclaimed a new dawn. You can look at Blair's government in a number of ways. It might be considered a ratification of Thatcherism insofar as Labour altered Clause Four, making the party far friendlier to business. It can be remembered for its miserable foreign wars. It can also be seen as a period of devolution away from Westminster, with results which we're seeing today in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

But in spite of the controversies, Blair's electoral success was so great that, in ways we might not appreciate, we still live in the aftermath of that 1997 landslide, and his subsequent victories in 2001 and 2005.

That's because large majorities





Peter Hitchens

are reflections of consensus. In 2010, David Cameron's Coalition government adopted a strong dose of Blair's Europhilia (with a few concessions to his backbenchers), and continued New Labourish policies when it came to the academisation of schools, international aid, civil partnerships, an interventionist foreign policy, and many other areas. The similarity between the two culminated in the spectacle of Blair and Cameron – alongside Blair's predecessor John Major – campaigning together on the same losing side in the 2016 referendum. Furthermore, the three of them argued for the same Covid restrictions in March 2020.

This has left a gap into which some conservatives – including the likes of Peter Hitchens, Toby Young and Douglas Murray – have been arguing for things outside the Blairite consensus. For Hitchens, the Conservatives' failure to promote a return to grammar schools is a particular point of criticism, as is the laxity of the police. For Young, lockdown was an outrage perpetrated against the great tradition of English freedom. For Murray, the Blair-Cameron axis is wrong over immigration, and was deservedly repudiated in 2016. All three of them would argue that there are far too many woke MPs, some of

whom nominally belong to the Conservative Party, but who aren't really conservatives at all.

Most heretically of all, each of these thinkers would reserve the right to subject the climate change orthodoxy to proper scrutiny, if only because questioning things is in the British political tradition, not to mention the broader scientific tradition.

Whether we agree with all this or not, each of these writers reads today bracingly if you grew up under the Blair consensus: they read like people thinking for themselves.

### Past the Age of Consent?

Consensus is, of course, not a bad thing per se. We have, for instance, been governed by a consensus that murder is a punishable crime for millennia to no-one's disadvantage but murderers. Likewise, our shared consensus that Shakespeare is a great playwright has preserved Shakespeare, and is another example of what might be called profitable consensus. When Tolstoy cantankerously announced towards the end of his life that Shakespeare was no good, he was thinking independently, but not particularly well. There is a distinction then to be made between useful polemic which ultimately turns out to be true, and wilful contrarianism, which causes a lot of noise and misleads a lot of people.

But despite these reservations, it must be admitted that consensus sometimes feels flabby. When too many people have arrived at the same conclusions it might be that those conclusions are dated, or have lost some spark.

So which kind is the the Blairite consensus? There are some warning signs which stretch beyond Tony Blair's own personal unpopularity.

It certainly isn't quite as popular as its holders would wish, or suppose. This fact was made clear to Remainer voters in the 2016 election: it turned out that a surprising number of people in the country were, while being ostensibly civilised, quietly thinking the unthinkable: that the Blairite worldview might be wrong somewhere at its Europhilic core.

But what really brought the question of independent thought into sharp focus was the Covid-19 pandemic. Whether lockdown might be deemed an overreaction or a wise necessity, it forced government into our lives like it has never been before and this in turn raised considerable questions around how we receive and sift data, what is true and what is false, and above all, what our personal relationship is with the notion of government interference.

It brought to the fore the whole question of statistical modelling and for some thinkers has ramifications not just for how we tackle the spread of viral disease, but also for the broader way in which we use scientific data. "The models were completely wrong," the economist Roger Bootle, another independent thinker of the right, tells me. "And it's the same in relation to the climate models – although not to quite the same extent, because the most unpredictable thing about the Covid-19 models was human behaviour, and that has slightly less bearing on the climate change models."

But the fact remains: by 2022, a generation of professionals in senior positions had come to maturity thinking and feeling roughly the same things about most things. If their worldview is wrong at all, then remarkably few ramifications have come their way: on the contrary, they have usually found their sense

of consensus ratified by professional success. Lockdown caused the consensus-bearers no harm since, financially, little can. Lawyers and accountants remained for the most part in spacious housing doing jobs which it is possible, and in many cases enjoyable, to do from home. Doctors were designated key workers and spared the strains of home schooling.

Even so, there are some warning signs that what the consensus bearers have been thinking and feeling might be wrong after all. If we look at inflation or high energy prices, the dubious tactics of Extinction Rebellion, the increasing extremism of wokeism, the long waiting times on the NHS, the former Chancellor Rishi Sunak's tax rises to pay for lockdown, and the relatively settled landscape post-Brexit, there is a sense that there might be value in listening to voices, from both left and right, that lie outside the consensus. We might not change our minds on policy but we'll certainly learn something about how to think.

The question is not just: "Who is right on these issues?" It is also: "What does independent thought look like in this day and age? And who has a motivation to practice it?"

### An Audience with Katharine the Great

To promote independent thinking, what kind of education system do we need?

For the right, Birbalsingh has arrived as a kind of saviour in this realm, seeming to embody some better method. Of course, as the writer of Ecclesiastes understood, there is nothing new under the sun: her new way of doing things is tethered to the old. Put simply, Birbalsingh argues for the importance of promoting knowledge of a shared cultural



Katharine Birbalsingh

tradition in order to foster the independence of thought which might ultimately free us of what she views as the groupthink of wokeness.

When I sit down with Birbalsingh at Michaela Community, I tell her that the place reminds me of grammar schools. She doesn't find it a helpful comparison. "There are a couple of grammar schools round here," she admits. "But they take the top slice. Any good teacher knows that it's really complex when teaching the bottom sets. If you've only got the top students, you don't have to think about learning in the same way. When you have a great cognitive diversity you have to do more."

In this sentence, 'more' means strictness and standards. I wonder

aloud whether there's any danger about the regime, and whether it might over time create conformity instead of individual inspiration? I tell the story of my old English teacher at Charterhouse, Philip Balkwill, who was famous for his eccentricity. In one English lesson, he came in, played Beethoven's 9th symphony and then left the room without explanation.

Birbalsingh is amused, but not especially impressed: "The thing is, you can only do that kind of thing when you've got a selective intake. If you do that in an inner-city school, the kids will all just be laughing and jumping around and running out of the lesson. And then you say, "Well, what have you achieved?" You've just created chaos. The kids have just





lost all respect for you and you will find it very difficult to build up your resilience again.”

Here then is one obstacle to independent thought: it can't be something you do overnight. You've got to lay the groundwork with discipline first. I mention that Balkwill's lessons for me operated on a kind of time bomb. I came to realise years later that he was talking about the porousness between disciplines and how music and literature might be interconnected.

Birbalsingh laughs: “The fact that you only realised that ten years later: that's ridiculous. Teaching is about making things explicit. He was doing things like that for himself and so that he could say to himself: “I'm the most amazing teacher.” He liked being eccentric. In the end, how much did he really teach?”

I say that it felt like being bequeathed a certain permission to roam freely across intellectual disciplines. Birbalsingh doesn't think that approach will generally work: “You need to realise that the kids here have no idea who Beethoven is unless we teach them that. Once I gave an assembly about Beethoven's Fifth, as I

wanted them to at least recognise the tune which you hear all the time. I was talking about how it was difficult for them growing up in a time of grime and drill. The worst for me when I was growing up was Kylie Minogue and how everyone was scandalised by her shorts. I put a picture of Beethoven up on the slides. Later when I was having lunch with the kids, I realised they thought Kylie Minogue and Beethoven were contemporaries because I hadn't made it clear. They don't know that there's music from the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th century and how it's changed. When they learn music here we start with A, B, C, D.”

She continues: “What you mightn't realise is just how impoverished some children are and that's what an inner city school is. Those antics of your teacher you described are not helpful.” I think again of the boy smiling in the corridor. I agree with Birbalsingh, and yet some small part of me wants to retain the idea of another approach. I find that Mr Balkwill's lessons can't be so instantly jettisoned. Something would be lost.

Uncle Toby

Sometimes of course having a good

education culminating in all the expected excellent results might not be a spur towards independent thinking: in fact, it might lead you up too obvious a career ladder meaning precisely the opposite – that you never have to think for yourself at all. It used to be that a dose of failure did a little good.

I talk to that noted independent thinker Toby Young – so much a bugbear of the left, that he seems to exist in a permanent ferment of being cancelled and recovering from his latest bout of cancellation. He tells me about his somewhat chequered early education: “I initially failed all my O Levels, and went to two different comprehensives. I retook and got three Cs, which was enough to scrape into the sixth form of William Ellis. I did well enough to apply to Oxford. I didn't meet the conditional offer, but was sent an acceptance letter by mistake. When that was pointed out to me, they then offered me a place – it was an unconventional route.”

Young, who would go on to set up The Modern Review, The Spectator Online and, in 2020, The Daily Sceptic, credits the entrepreneurial side to his upbringing. “My father was one of the people behind the Open University. He created over 50 organisations of one kind or another during his life. A couple of those got torched in David Cameron's Bonfire of the Quangoes. He was a lifelong socialist and one of this country's first sociologists in addition to running a Research Institute in Bethnal Green, he implemented these institutions. That gave me confidence.”

Young was then exposed to the left-of-centre culture of Oxford, before relocating to America, and landing among the uber-left campus life at Harvard. This was the era when



Alan Bloom published his famous Closing of the American Mind, a sort of prophetic cri de coeur about the encroachment of what we would now call ‘wokeness’ onto campuses. Young recalls: “Within my year group at Brasenose [at Oxford] studying PPE, we had the full gamut from a Monday Club tubthumper to a member of the revolutionary Communist party and every shade in between – and there were only ten students.” And in the US? “At Harvard, there was nothing like that range of opinion even in the entire government department, which encompassed hundreds of students. The main debate was between two types of liberalisms – Nozickian and Rawlsian liberalism – that was the extent of the disagreement, and Nozickians were a real minority!”

This sounds like the sort of landscape which Katharine Birbalsingh, in her different way, is committed to pushing back at. Young agrees: “I'm a big fan of Michaela – it's incredible. In Michael Gove's wildest dreams I don't think he'd've anticipated the free schools programme would have given birth to such a perfect embodiment of what he views a school to be.”

So is the encroachment on independent thinking less to do with

some sort of Blairite inheritance, and more to do with groupthink migrating from America to this country? Young replies: “I certainly think that as British universities have admitted more American students and grown in size, they have attracted left-wing academics with a sense of social mission who want to change the world by converting and evangelising. But it's partly a generational shift; most of these people were radicalised in the 1960s. You gradually see more of a left-wing imbalance in the professoriat.”

This mindset in turn has infiltrated, or so the argument goes, every strata of society, achieving numerous coups: it captured most of the major cultural institutions; the BBC; and even large swathes of the Conservative Party. In response to the professional calamity which can sometimes assail those who speak up against this consensus, Young founded the Free Speech Union in 2020.

## “Most people still retain the habit of thinking independently.”

I ask Young about the future of independent thought and he initially strikes a surprisingly optimistic note: “The curious thing is that even though all our main cultural institutions – the BBC, heritage institutions, performance arts companies, the National Theatre – they've all been captured by this rather small-minded illiberal ideological cult, at the same time you've had right-of-centre figures winning elections. The professions and the educated elite are beholden to this

woke cult, but it hasn't filtered down to ordinary people.”

This, in Young's view, is a sign that most people still retain the habit of thinking independently. “There's a disconnect,” he explains. “You see that in the way in which the trans lobby has got into trouble by trying to give trans women access to women's changing rooms in department stores without trying to persuade the public it's the right thing to do. That's proved quite unpopular and authoritarian. All is not lost.”

Even so, he also issues a note of caution. “One of the reasons to be doubtful about how quickly the spirit of liberty can be restored is that it was revealed to be in a very decrepit state during the last two years. It was surprisingly easy for the government and various public health agencies, civil servants and the BBC to persuade people to exchange their liberty for safety and much more so than it would have been in the Asian flu in the 1950s. That was true not just of Britain but of most liberal democracies.”

Of course, we must be careful here not to attribute all independent thought to lockdown sceptics. For instance, the vaccines – not to mention the inventive way in which those vaccines were rolled out – arguably constitute a greater example of initiative than anything shown by those who stood from the touchlines arguing against lockdown.

But Young, Murray and Hitchens aren't arguing against science. What they would say is that science has become dangerously allied to politics, that it is poorly reported leading to a bogus consensus (usually in the direction of the exaggeration of danger), and that an atmosphere of intolerance has grown up around some



James Badgett



of the conclusions it has arrived at. Clinchingly, they would simply defend their right to ask questions about it.

#### A Question of Method

So how would Young go about teaching independent thought? “I’ve been wondering whether, under the guise of teaching schoolchildren how to debate, you could teach them some critical thinking skills,” he replies. “It’s extraordinary when you argue with young people how often they fall back on what they think of as the trump card of their own lived experience. It doesn’t matter if you present them with data that contradicts their claim.”

I ask for examples. “Let’s say you’re arguing with a young black student about whether or not Britain is an institutionally racist country,” Young says. “You could point out, for example, that more black boys go to university from underprivileged backgrounds than do white boys. Or you could cite the fact that Indians on average earn more than white Britons. You could also point to the success of boys of African heritage at university and in the professions. There’s actually all sorts of evidence that not being born with a white skin isn’t an insurmountable handicap in this

country. You could present that case as reasonably and calmly as possible but they could just say: “That’s not my experience, but you’re a white man and from my point of view, that’s bollocks.” Nearly all children nowadays fall back on this Megan Markle ‘my truth’ trump card.”

So what do we do? Young has clearly been thinking deeply about this: “It would be really helpful to teach children why that isn’t a knock-down argument, and why it isn’t a trump card. It’s also important for them to know why data is more important than anecdote and how you can merge lots of different people’s lived experience to come up with a more objective balanced view as to what the collective experience is.”

Does he think the teaching profession will be able to do this? Young isn’t sure. “Teachers these days are shy of challenging emotional impassioned teenagers – particularly if they’re members of disadvantaged groups. In taking that stance, they allow these irrational ideas to flourish.”

So would that require some kind of shift in the curriculum? “The main thing we need to do is to teach them the rudiments of how to build an argument, recognise a good from a bad argument, and teach what the most common logical fallacies are. Those analytical skills would mean you’d develop a bullshit detector.”

#### Avenging Angel

It’s interesting that Young’s background is predominantly entrepreneurial and I begin to wonder whether I’m really talking to a journalist or to an entrepreneur. Is there something about being an entrepreneur which fosters independent thought? To find out, I

talk with James Badgett, the CEO and founder of the enormously successful Angel Investment Network. Badgett, 40, isn’t just a well-known entrepreneur in his own right, but, given the unique nature of his business, also the centrepiece of a vast amount of economic activity.

So does he feel that as an entrepreneur he’s under greater pressure to think independently? “It’s quite straightforward. When I wake in the morning, first I have to check I’m okay. Then I have to make sure my team is okay. You can’t lie to yourself as a business-owner because you’ll get found out. That means that if the government tells you to work from home, or if The Guardian tells you leaving the European Union is a disaster, or if Greta Thunberg tells you the planet is about to burn – you have a responsibility to go away and check if those things are actually going to happen.”

Badgett is known for holding unpopular opinions, but he views it as important for his many businesses to make sure he holds firm. “I think I’ve got to the point now where almost any view I hold isn’t held by the majority,” Badgett says. “I’ve grown used to people thinking I have an unusual take but I’m not going to stop saying what I think.”

Badgett’s success can partly be attributed to an ability to cut through the range of information he receives in order to decide on the right strategy for his businesses. He tells me of his dislike of corporate settings: “You just feel yourself become cretinised when you sit in these big firms. You ask for the coffee, and sit back and feel somehow flattered to be in there – and I think that happens to a lot of people who become quite limited in their outlook. They’ve first become too



comfortable. But I’ve learned that in business you’ve got to be careful not to fall for all that. You have to remain rooted – and you have to surround yourself with the right people.”

He is sceptical of anyone too who “suggests strategies which are easier to say than to do” and is always creative in the way he runs his companies. Badgett has a Nepalese office of the Angel Investment Network, and realised before the pandemic that it would be affordable for the company to have a top chef cook for his workforce and that it would also be a great boost for the company. “I went ahead and did it – though I expect the BBC would have told me it was impossible.”

Like Young, Badgett opposed lockdown in March 2020, and also counts himself a climate change sceptic. “One thing I disagree with in relation to Greta Thunberg is this elevation of the child to the level of sage. She’s still very young and her predictions are likely to be wildly inaccurate just as Dr Niall Ferguson’s were during Covid-19.”

I ask Badgett whether he thinks we need to do more in education to teach commercial acumen. “The truth is

that most people walk into working life absolutely financially illiterate and what you’re seeing today is the effect of a woke university system on the workplace,” he replies. “Basically, people don’t have the skills by which to sift information or to judge what’s true and what’s false – what is theory, and what is fact. What I think does happen though is that people who run businesses become more attuned to that – again, if you don’t your business will go under.”

Whether one agrees with Badgett or not, he is a reminder that the ability to think independently as a society must be tied to a greater commercial sense.

#### Approaching the Source

If independent thought is under threat then there are a number of clear possible reasons for it. One is the influence of American wokeism on our university system as outlined by Young. Another might be the impact of the Blair-Cameron axis. A lack of commercial acumen is another: some have noted that epidemiologists were more likely to make gloomy predictions about coronavirus since, being in the pay of the government, they didn’t have to live with the commercial ramifications of those predilections.

But most people accept that the media, and the way in which we receive our information, also impacts our ability to make up our own minds effectively on important issues.

One person well-placed to consider these matters is Sir Bill Wiggin MP, who represents North Herefordshire. He has spent 20 years in Parliament, and has had a front row seat on the way in which reality can be distorted by the media – and how this causes both misery for beleaguered MPs

and confusion in the electorate who are often unable to find their way to primary source material.

After years in the public eye, Wiggin says he’s become acutely aware of what journalism is and how it should be read. “When you read the newspaper, you’ve got to be careful,” he explains. “I’ll read whatever’s lying next to me – but I don’t read it believing it to be the gospel. I’m happy to read The Sun, The Guardian or The China Daily but I’m always reading it in a certain way with the awareness that they will have an agenda.”

**“We’ve got to stop thinking that journalism is a Christian and pure-spirited thing. It’s as commercial as Star Wars.”**

And what, in Wiggin’s opinion, is their agenda? “It’s quite simple really, it’s trying to outrage you or to terrify you.” So what would Wiggin’s advice be to people in respect of reading the mainstream media? “Don’t base your life on a publication: be broader than that. You need to be. And also realise that this sensationalism is driving all aspects of the media. For example, I get The Daily Express online. It has wonderful headlines: “Brexit delivers huge increases in British business.” Two days later it will say: “Brexit cuts British business”. They’re playing us! We’ve got to stop thinking that journalism is a Christian and pure-spirited thing. It’s as commercial as Star Wars.”





I mention to Wiggin that I value the way in which my history degree gave me a habit of going to the primary source in order to assess the events of the past.

## “You shouldn’t be prepared to die in a ditch according to what you’ve read.”

Wiggin agrees but worries that these skills are being lost in the contemporary media maelstrom: “Today, The Guardian and the BBC are going to the source for you. When you watch the news tonight, you will see Vladimir Zelensky make an announcement about how Russians are losing in Ukraine, and the newsreader will say: “Now, we go to our Ukraine correspondent.” I want to hear from Zelensky not your correspondent! Then you might cut to another correspondent or expert: it was second hand when you got it from the BBC – now it’s third hand.”

The Mp also points out that we tend to practice critical thinking better

in other areas of our lives: “Anyone reading this article will know that if they go to a football match, what they see is different to what they read about it afterwards: but they don’t apply those lessons to their politics. Soak it up but don’t close your mind. When you read that x is wicked or that y is good a little voice in your head should say: “Well, that’s what it says here”. You shouldn’t be prepared to die in a ditch according to what you’ve read.”

### Good Humours

One notable thing is that some right wing thinkers often seem to injure their case with a certain cantankerousness which somehow makes their case less persuasive. Of course, there might be mitigating circumstances. Most of them haven’t been listened to throughout their professional lives, and must feel a sense of mounting frustration at always feeling in the right and then watching governments continually make catastrophic moves.

Although Peter Hitchens can be funny, it is probably the case that there has rarely been a less Christian-sounding Christian in the public sphere. There can sometimes be a sense of infinite probity about his public persona which feels somewhat tiring – reading him sometimes, one feels that nobody could manage long in his ideal state. One would want to be free a moment, like that boy in the Michaela Community corridor. There is a frequent note of exasperation – a sense of being almost tired of being so in the right – which makes one want to lodge objections, and which has probably led to his ideas being infrequently taken up by government.

This brings me to Armando Iannucci and the importance of comedy in the

realm of independent thinking. John Cleese recently observed that there is no such thing as a ‘woke joke’, but it seems to me that there are still vestiges on the left which are able to raise that profound laugh which lets you know an independent truth has been arrived at.

Iannucci has always been able to do this – most notably in The Thick of It and Veep – those superb comedies which could only have been written by a unique cast of mind. Sure enough, Iannucci has been in fine form during the pandemic having penned an epic poetic satire on the first years of the Johnson administration called Pandemonium. We need only read its opening page to know that this is a voice of the left which is hardly caught up in groupthink:

*Tell, Mighty Wit, how the highest in forethought and,*

*That tremendous plus, The Science,*

*Saw off our panic and Globed vexation*

*Until a drape of calmness furlled around the earth*

*And beckoned a new and greater normal into each life*

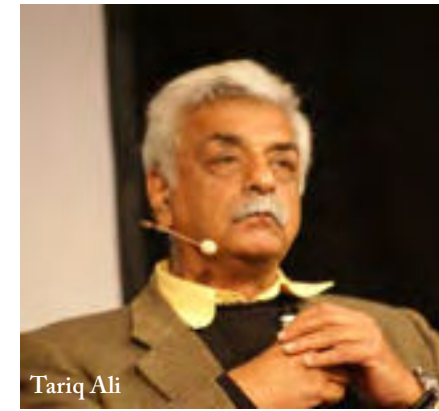
*For which we give plenty gratitude and pay*

*Willingly for the vict’ry triumph*

*Merited by these wisest gods.*

It is worth noting how the big laugh comes from the line ‘that tremendous plus, the Science’ – the same Science which is in its way is poked at, and queried, by Young, Hitchens, Badgett and others. Here it is being mocked too. Blairism itself was full of those ‘tremendous pluses’, whose validity we were never meant to query.

Pandemonium mocks Johnson, Matt Hancock, Tory donors, and Dominic Cummings. It suggests again that this



era of consensus needn’t necessarily be worried at in a misanthropic spirit. It might be done with wit and laughter too. It is an enduring fact that many of the great thinkers of the 1930s – one thinks of George Bernard Shaw and Ezra Pound – fell for Stalinism and Nazism respectively. It took Charlie Chaplin and PG Wodehouse to laugh them out of town.

Iannucci doesn’t extend his mockery to the Labour Party in the poem – and perhaps it would have been a better poem if he had. Bu one leftist intellectual who is prepared to query Starmerism – currently a kind of low energy Blairism – is the philosopher and poet Tariq Ali. Ali has just published – to the right’s dismay – a book attacking the legacy of Winston Churchill called Winston Churchill: His Crimes, His Times.

For Ali, the habit of consensus thinking began further back in time during the post-War period: “I would refine the analysis slightly,” he says, when I describe the theory of the Blairite consensus. “The post-War consensus which was more or less agreed by Labour and the Tories after the Second World War, was that we have to go down the social democratic route. In Britain, this consensus was implemented and never altered in any meaningful sense, until it was broken definitively by Margaret Thatcher.”

For Ali this is all bound up in the Churchill cult which began at that time, and has been continued by Johnson. Interestingly, Ali says that he prefers reading thinkers like Peter Hitchens to those on the centre right. “Obviously Peter and I won’t agree on most things but I have some respect for him. There is a degree of honesty and integrity in Peter which I don’t find in liberal writers. Look at the stand he’s taken on Julian Assange. I am amazed he’s still a columnist on The Mail on Sunday: it’s much sharper than things I read in The Guardian.”

It’s this which often marks out independent thinking: integrity and the desire to conduct our thinking for the right reasons. And what does Peter Hitchens say in return? “I think Tariq Ali is a valuable independent voice because I think freedom dies without dissent. He’s undeniably intelligent, and undeniably thoughtful. I disagree with him profoundly on many things, and have done so publicly on such matters as the nature of Fidel Castro’s Cuba.”

And what has it been like when they have sparred? “He has responded courteously, as a civilised person should, though he should have a higher opinion of The Mail on Sunday, which has a strong record of independent thinking. I think we both come from an era when an opponent was not necessarily an enemy. I also suspect him of having a sense of humour. I wouldn’t say this feeling has anything to do with my own Marxist past. Most of my former comrades dislike me personally, though I can’t be bothered to return the compliment.”

So perhaps the surest route to independent thinking is an education like that offered by Birbalsingh at

Michaela Community, but with just that hint of a smile offered by that boy in the corridor, and by Philip Balkwill back at Charterhouse in the 1990s.

But we also need much more: better commercial education as suggested by the examples of Toby Young and James Badgett; a deeper awareness of the need to go to the primary source as espoused by Wiggin. We also need Tariq Ali’s perspective of the deeper past.

But it is Armando Iannucci’s ability with a joke which can sometimes seem most pertinent. It is this which verifies where we really stand on an issue, and which clears the decks and allows us to think clearly about problems.

I didn’t tell Birbalsingh about another one of Philip Balkwill’s lessons. He would show us Beyond the Fringe and the great sketch where Peter Cook plays Arthur Streeb-Greebling who has spent his life ‘underwater teaching ravens to fly’. It was the silliest thing I’d ever heard – and it made me want to watch more. ‘Is it difficult to get ravens to fly underwater?’ asks Dudley Moore. “I think here difficult is a very good word,” Cook replies.

The same is true in the realm of independent thinking – but as the problems of the world mount, and the implications of groupthink become clearer, this is increasingly a conversation we need to have as a society. [f](#)



# Wish you were here?

“I’d heard rumours it was the best villa in Sri Lanka. I’d like to see a better one.”

St Mary’s Ascot parent



“Ranawara is an incredible palatial house on the beach – to call it a villa does not do it justice!”

Eton College parent



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Exclusive:

## — David Cameron and the plight — of the former Prime Minister

ROBERT GOLDING REPORTS ON DAVID CAMERON’S POST-PREMIERSHIP  
AND WHAT IT CAN TEACH US ABOUT THE MEANING OF SUCCESS



**I**t’s not quite clear if David Cameron is taller than you might expect, or whether you’ve given him extra height just by paying him more attention. It is as if fame has its own laws of perspective.

But the word ‘fame’ doesn’t quite encompass the experience of conversing with a former prime minister. In the first place, power is a very specific subset of fame. A David Cameron or a Tony Blair didn’t rise to our notice through artistic popularity or some kind of scientific or commercial ingenuity. In fact, if we are being mindful of our democratic inheritance, we might feel a certain sense of ownership over the likes of Cameron: after all, we put him there.

That fact makes us feel all sorts of thing we don’t necessarily feel with, say Elton John or Timothy Berners-Lee. It is possible – perhaps it is even quite likely – for a UK prime minister to achieve considerable sway over our lives and at the same time for him not to have done a single thing we cherish. Even Cameron’s achievements – with the possible exception of civil partnerships – aren’t necessarily loved.

But it’s the quirk of democracies that you often find that British people reserve their right to moan about a prime minister behind their back but to be in awe of them when in their company. A prime minister is therefore the recipient of mixed messages which might amount almost to gaslighting:

respect and ridicule dovetail through their lives upon assuming the position, and the oddity of it all won’t let up once they’ve left office. It takes a death to exit the weirdness of Cameron’s level of fame.

We caught up with Cameron at a Grapevine event in Oxfordshire where he was discussing his post-premiership priority – Alzheimer’s Research – with Lord Finkelstein. So whatever made him think he’d be a good Prime Minister? “Very good question. I was elected in 2001. From 1997 to 2000 we’d made virtually no progress at all. We were just in a terrible position. And so I think everyone was asking themselves, what is it the Conservative Party and what does it need to do? I took the more





David Cameron, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, speaking at City of London School. 13.2.2020 (Photographer Sam Pearce / www.square-image.co.uk)

radical end of things and said, ‘Well actually, we’ve got to change a hell of a lot of things’. And the more I looked at the other people who were putting themselves forward, I didn’t think any of them were radical enough in saying what needed to change.”

What he means by this is really cultural change – a shift in the party’s attitude to gay marriage would lead to the Civil Partnerships Act 2004, and Cameron notes that his ‘hug a huskie’ stance on the environment continues to resonate today. “It’s fantastic that we have had COP 26 in Glasgow, and a Conservative Prime Minister who’s seen as one of the world leaders on the environment. That’s a great thing, and it’s because the Conservative Party decided it was a proper topic for us.”

As I listen to Cameron speak, I find myself thinking of the sheer strangeness of the role of prime minister – and then the even greater oddity of being a retired prime minister. The role itself – recently

described by Sir Anthony Seldon as The Impossible Office – is unique. Let us toss partisanship to one side for one moment and admit that you have to be intelligent to secure the role in the first place. Once you have done that, an unusual array of interesting experience and information comes your way and you have to develop ways to sift and sort that information.

To hear Cameron talk is not just to be reminded of Tony Blair – as has always been the case, sometimes to the distress of people who would suspect Cameron of not being a true Conservative – but of Gordon Brown and Theresa May too. It’s a sense that they know how the world works and this lends their opinion on anything unusual credence – more so than a former Cabinet minister, or even than a former permanent secretary.

Members of the Royal Family meanwhile, though they might develop lengthier experience at the top, may experience a shielded version of

reality which keeps from them the real difficulties which lie at the base of decision-making. Prime Ministers are the people who have climbed, in Disraeli’s words, ‘to the top the greasy pole’. Princes – for all the respect they sometimes engender – are merely placed in palaces.

So what sort of skills does a prime minister develop – and how can they be deployed to solve problems once the individual has left Downing Street? Cameron is thoughtful in his reply: “I would say the first is the experience you gain in chairing a Cabinet, when you have quite a lot of people who support you and quite a lot of people who don’t support you, and you’re trying to corral people in the same direction – that is a useful skill.”

These skills, developed at the highest level, are, one suspects, somewhat wasted in chairing the comparatively small operation of a private office once one departs. But Cameron has done

much more than that, and is throwing himself particularly now into his role as President of Alzheimer’s Research UK.

Cameron continues: “Furthermore, all the connections that you make, in terms of life sciences, business, philanthropy make a difference. We’ve got Bill Gates now involved in the fight against Alzheimer’s: he’s funding the early detection project. His father had Alzheimer’s, and he’s bringing billions to play into it. So I think all those things bring people together.”

Cameron adds that as Prime Minister, you get used to figuring out ways to actually get things done: “Now, I’m not a scientist myself: I was forbidden from doing physics and chemistry because I wasn’t good enough. But one of the reasons I got interested in this was because when I was in government, I got my science team around the table and asked them what were the most promising avenues for a big breakthrough in terms of science. They pointed me to the 100,000 Genomes Project, which has been hugely important in cracking Covid-19. They also pointed me towards Alzheimer’s because of the costs of the disease on the UK economy. Those sorts of skills – money raising, bashing heads together, getting things done – all help.”

Whatever you think of Cameron’s premiership, or his decision to grant the European referendum which made that premiership unravel with such dramatic swiftness in 2016, this is plainly a formidable set of skills.

And it turns out I’m not the only one to think they’re not being put to good use. Sam Gyimah held a range of ministerial posts under Cameron, and remains close to the former prime minister. He laments this sense that departing prime ministers are, in effect, put out to pasture: “Very few people have that



unique experience and perspective but we don’t use them properly once they leave office,” he tells me.

**“My life now is all about turning ideas into reality and I particularly like ideas where there’s a positive social impact.”**

I remind Gyimah of Bill Clinton’s lament that he felt he was leaving just as he had learned how to do the job. Blair, after 10 years, sometimes gave the same impression. But Gyimah, who now works in the corporate sector in many roles including as a non-executive director at Goldman Sachs International, is philosophical. “My life now is all about turning ideas into reality and I particularly like ideas where there’s a positive social impact. It’s not politics – but some of the things which attracted me to politics still apply. It’s just that I’m dealing with an investment response instead of a government response to problems. If you can unlock capital at scale then it can do wonderful things.”

So there is life after politics – but still, the life after politics for a prime minister can seem strangely limited and truncated. Surrounded by their security teams, with just the past for company, they must sometimes feel a strange mixture of solitude and frustrated irrelevance. It reminds me of a story once told to me by the photographer Graham Flack who remembers going to photograph David Cameron in respect of the famous writing-shed Cameron had installed in his garden at his Oxfordshire home. He and the journalist in question were early and waited for a while in a layby down the road from Cameron’s residence. When they arrived, they mentioned this to Cameron’s protection unit who replied: “Yes, we know, we were watching you.” The photograph itself had to be shot and reshot because one particular tree made the team worry that a viewer of the photograph would be able to locate Cameron’s house.

It doesn’t sound like much of a life – and yet perhaps these limits are a small hardship for the enormous privilege of having been caught up in history. During the on-stage Q&A, Finkelstein asks Cameron whether being Prime Minister has altered his perspective on great historical figures? Cameron relishes the question: “I think it makes you realise how the little decisions you’re making aren’t black and white. It’s not presented every day as “Here’s an important issue Prime Minister, but here’s the right decision and here are two wrong decisions. When are you going to make the right decision?” Cameron continues: “Many of the decisions you make are degrees of bad, and you’re trying to avoid the worst – and some of them you will get wrong. I think you do feel a greater sympathy for people who make the wrong decisions.



What that does is give an enormous respect for those prime ministers who have the very biggest decisions to make. When you think of what Churchill did in May 1940, specifically the decision to fight on against Hitler, you're more aware of the enormity of those really big decisions. Today, we'll look back and think: "Well, of course we should do that". But at the time, Churchill was surrounded by people saying, "No, we'll get destroyed, the British Empire will be lost, we'll never hold out."

And yet those people who make the really big choices nowadays leave office with plenty to offer – and yet there seems to be little by way of structure once they do depart. Is the UK missing an opportunity here? Might it be that we should have some kind of Council of Elders, consisting of former prime ministers who might advise the sitting prime minister, as a sort of version of the weekly audience with the Queen?

**“One of the best things was going to see HM Queen. It was an enormous treat, because you're literally spending an hour with the world's greatest public servant.”**

When Cameron is asked about those weekly meetings with HM Queen he is effusive: "One of the best things was going to see the Queen. It was an enormous treat, because you're literally spending an hour with the world's greatest public servant. I remember when I was at Eton, the Queen used to



Sir Bill Wiggin

come to the carol service. The first year she came, I read the lesson. I got to the podium and forgot to say: "Thanks be to God at the end". I looked at the podium and at the Queen and said: "Oh shit." So I had the unique position 30 years' later to ask the Queen: "Do you remember me saying that?" While I can't reveal any of that conversation, my head stayed on my shoulders."

One can easily imagine regular contact with previous prime ministers having a similar effect: surely it is salutary to have contact with your predecessors, as both a source of empathy, but also as a sort of memento mori, that your time in the spotlight shall recede swifter than you expect?

So has Cameron been back since? "Not very often. But we did have a very entertaining dinner for the 2001 intake, where Sir Bill Wiggin and I tripped off to London. [Cameron was speaking before Boris Johnson resigned.] It's interesting going around the office and seeing people who worked with me and people I remember from around the building. And actually the mood was good. You felt like there was someone in the job who really enjoys it – but there's no point in doing the job if you can't relish the challenges."

Cameron also remembers the humour of the job: "I had Nicolas Sarkozy in –

actually the first person who visited me at 10 Downing Street. And obviously he brought his beautiful wife Carla Bruni. I remember this particularly well, because my private secretary was with me as they were driving up Downing Street. I said to my private secretary: "I shake his hand. Do I kiss Carla?" He said: "Yes, I think you should kiss Carla, she's French." I said: "How many times should I kiss Carla?" My private secretary: "As many times as you can get away with!"

Amused by this, I decide to catch up with Sir Bill Wiggin and ask him about his friendship with Cameron, and what the proper place is for a prime minister after their premiership is over.

"They should all go to the House of Lords," Wiggin says, without missing a beat. "That is the right place for them and this trend to not go there is really worrying."

Wiggin also points to the uniqueness of prime ministers: "They've all held the nuclear codes. When they talk about nuclear weapons, they've thought about it really hard. These guys have a hideous responsibility. They also get exposed to huge amounts of information from the best experts."

So what's the history of this? Wiggin explains: "If you've been Prime Minister, you are entitled to an earldom, and Clement Atlee was the last to take it. I'd like to see that change."

Wiggin – who recently received his own knighthood – also links the case of Cameron and others to a wider need for House of Lords reform: "The House of Lords is really important, and we currently have the wrong people in there. We need to stop placing Olympic champions in the Upper Chamber. If you've won a gold medal, you've already been rewarded and it makes the honours system superfluous. Our system should

focus on public service and delivery."

Of course, there is other provision in place. According to the Public Service Act 2013, a former prime minister is entitled to an annual pension 'equal to one half of their final salary when they left that office, regardless of age or length of service.' Cameron actually waived this upon departure from office in 2016, unlike Tony Blair who didn't.

Of course, this decision – gallant as it appeared at the time – didn't necessarily end well, as all those who followed the Greensill Capital affair know. This episode, which for many has tarnished Cameron's legacy, is symptomatic of a broader problem: there is still an abiding sense that prime ministers don't know what to do with themselves. In fact, the happiest of the living former prime ministers seems to be Theresa May, who retains the parliamentary structures of life by remaining an MP – a job she is manifestly good at.

Is there anything to be learned from the American system? In the first place you have the great fandango surrounding presidential libraries which appears to keep former presidents busy, while also regenerating an area economically. Likewise, the big bucks memoir – though it probably has a Churchillian origin – has a sort of American tint to it these days. Cameron's For the Record is rather a good one, and better than either Brown's or Blair's. May's we still await.

But there is also another abiding image of former presidents gathering together for photo ops to work on cross-party hurricane relief for the good of the country. This occurred during the Hurricane Katrina in 2006 when the world was informed of the friendship between Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush.

Is this something the UK should emulate? If Cameron were to be given some kind of government Alzheimer's

portfolio only the most timorous betting man would think he would be unable to achieve results. Cameron explains the problem: "Dementia is caused by diseases of the brain of which Alzheimer's is the most significant. Just as we're cracking diseases like cancer or heart disease, we should be focusing on this. When I was premier, I became more and more convinced that this was an area that needed proper government attention for scientific tests, for more research. It was way behind cancer research, so that became quite a priority of mine as prime minister."

Cameron's role now as President of Alzheimer's Research UK includes raising money for the organisation as well as chairing the Board of our Early Detection of Neurodegenerative Diseases Initiative, an ambitious project which seeks to develop a digital tool to help detect the diseases that cause dementia years before the symptoms start.

**“When you think of Number 10 you think it must be this enormous power. Actually, I think the greatest surprise about it is not how much power you have – but how little.”**

Even so, Cameron still remembers his time in Number 10 fondly: "One of the great things about being Prime Minister is you can really put your shoulder to the wheel on some sort of slightly second order issue, and you can move things really quickly, really rapidly. The fact that a prime minister decides to make dementia a priority with the G8 really

does make a big difference because the rest of the world goes "Oh well, we all want to think about that".

And yet how frustrating to have had that power, to have achieved the knowledge of how to utilise it, and then, over an unrelated referendum to be deprived of the ability to solve those problems. Of course, this is democracy, but it still feels as though an opportunity is being missed somehow.

So what did Cameron most learn while in Number 10? "When you think of Number 10 you think it must be this enormous power. Actually, I think the greatest surprise about it is not how much power you have – but how little." How so? Cameron explains: "The other departments you're dealing with are ten times the size of 10 Downing Street, and they often quite literally don't do what they're told. Anyone in business reading this will be familiar with the idea that your finance manager didn't respond to your command, and that does regularly happen. As a tiny example, I wanted to empty our prisons of Jamaican offenders by using a budget to build a prison in Jamaica. It was agreed we were going to do it, and spend the money. Six months later, I asked "How's my Jamaican prison?" Literally nothing had happened. So you have to remember that in Number 10 you lead by building a team and making it work with you and for you."

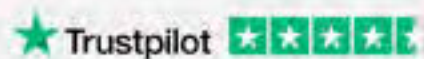
And, of course, we all need to do that. Prime Ministers are unique in having been placed so severely under the microscope. But they teach us about human flaw and potential in equal measure. In particular, studying the lives of former Prime Ministers has something to tell us all about what we really want, and what success ultimately means for each of us. **f**





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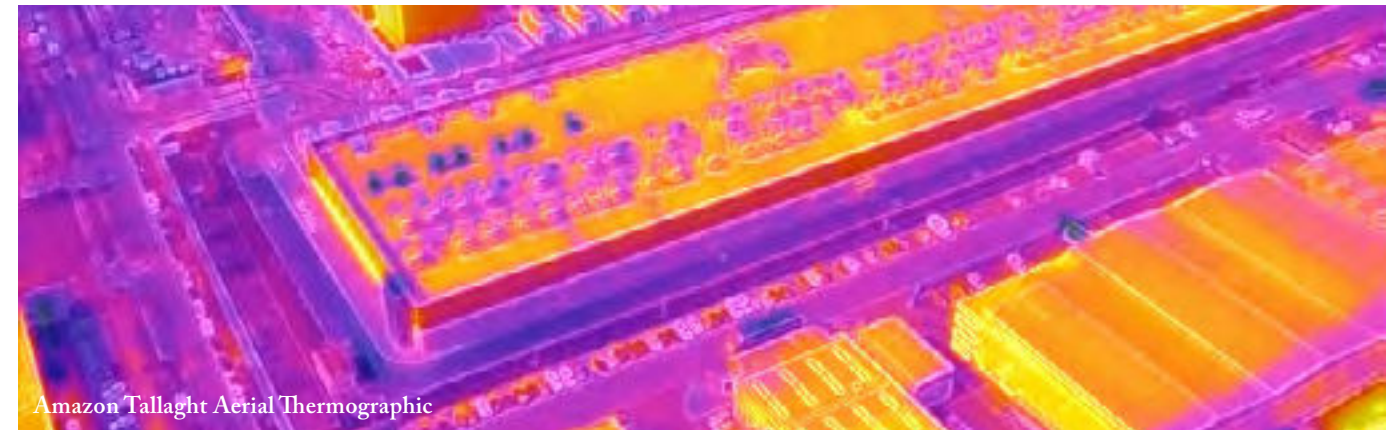
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## Photo essay: The Data in Our Midst

BY IRIS SPARK



Amazon Tallaght Aerial Thermographic

**V**ery possibly, if one had to pick a word of this century so far you'd come up with 'data'.

We all receive data, examine it, worry about the data we're not receiving, and question the data we have, wondering if its bona fide or in some way false.

But data, by its very nature, feels invisible. It's this which gives it its power – the sense of something both powerful and intangible.

Yet a recent exhibition at Roka in Imperial Wharf showed that this isn't the case. In actual fact, the need to store data has created a new and varied architecture. Facts which at first seem like they might belong to the ether – such as the fact that Google processes around 5.6 billion search requests per day – turn out to have ramifications in the real world around of us.

Sometimes data centres are housed in our midst in sheds and buildings – in precisely the sort of non-descript architecture you'd expect. But sometimes they are in the world around of us – for instance, in the former department store Macy's. This fact alone might be taken as an emblem of the way our world is

going: people used to go to this place physically to buy clothes, but now it is a place committed to housing the data by which we can do so online.

Meanwhile, former print works in Chicago, which used to produce Sears Catalogues and Yellow Pages, is now the Lakeside Technology Centre. In these instances, it can be surprising to find that the usage of a building has changed right before our eyes. The sense is then not so much of the pace of change, but of its surreptitiousness, even its secrecy.

This new architecture can also surprise by being housed underground as is the case at Pionen Bunker in Sweden, which formerly hosted Wikileaks and can only be accessed deep below 30 metres of granite. But if data lies beneath our feet, it also now inhabits the skies: in 2016, NASA created the New Solar System Internet to communicate with its Voyager and Mars rovers. It's the first space-based data centre – another sign of the times.

But if one looks at the question of the energy it takes to create the architecture which houses our data then you realise that it is in a head-on collision with the question of climate change. Put

simply, these places have gigantic carbon footprints. Some architects have come up with renewable solutions. Lefdal Mine Centre, for instance, is 85 feet underground and surrounded by solid limestone. It is 100 per cent renewable and is cooled by water from nearby fjords.

But often in these designs, we find a knowing juxtaposition between the sheer amount of energy used to fuel our online lifestyles and prevailing climate anxiety. At Gak Chunchoon in China, trees planted on the roof reduce the amount of electricity used for air conditioning, as well as blocking the glare of the summer sun, protecting the site from heat island effect. At AM4 Equinix in Amsterdam, a moat intervenes between the public and the enormous data centre to take into account public awareness of the amount of energy these buildings use.

This is how the world changes – almost imperceptibly, and never without anxiety or regret. It would be tempting to say that the buildings in this essay represent our future, and perhaps they do to some extent. But really they represent something much more complicated: our restless, ambitious present. *f*





Kolos Data Center in Norway



Pionen Data Center – Stockholm, Sweden – Atlas Obscura



Equinix data center AM7 at the Business Park Amstel III in Amsterdam



Smart Shed – Scott Brownrigg





Equinix: AM4 Amsterdam IBX Data Center



The Spark - Snøhetta



Belvedere Data Centre, London



Belvedere Data Centre, London

*This exhibition Power House: The architecture of Data Centers ran at Roca London Gallery from 3rd November 2021 - 14th April 2022.*



# The Baroness and the Mujahideen: The remarkable tale of Marefat school in Afghanistan

BY CHRISTOPHER JACKSON



Morning Gathering of the students

**V**ladimir Putin's Russia launched a special operation against Ukraine on 24th February. This episode had the appalling ramifications which we have been seeing all year: appalling casualties, displaced peoples and incalculable economic damage. But it also had another effect. It made us forget the people of Afghanistan.

Our lives are both cosy and frenetic. These two things can feel interlinked. We note the latest crisis but, too busy with our gym memberships and our

latest Netflix addiction, there is the suspicion that we can't quite enter into the distant misfortunes of others as we should. We are lucky, but luck by definition cannot really comprehend the unfortunate. And so we move swiftly onto the next thing, expressing our heartache for the Ukrainians, but suddenly without room to mind too much about what's happening in Kabul.

It goes without saying that this isn't how it should be. But every now and then, things snap back into place and we understand that history is about nothing

if it can't take into account the long haul.

Last year I was meeting with Lord Dennis Stevenson, the former chair of HBOS and now a cross-bencher in the House of Lords, who began telling me about a school in Afghanistan which he had been involved in. The school, he said, was called Marefat. I don't think I caught the name at the time, and wouldn't learn the word's meaning until much later: Marefat roughly translates as 'knowledge' or 'wisdom'. It is a kind of sacred word. This is fitting: this is a sacred story.



Baroness D'Souza

## To the House of Lords

Stevenson outlined the story for me. The school, he said, had been the most astonishing success and, during the period of American occupation, provided a beacon for Afghan girls when it came to education. I asked about the prospects of the school now that the Americans had left.

Stevenson was surprisingly optimistic. "The coverage in the media is appallingly simplistic," he told me. "The Taliban is deeply divided and we want to see if something can still be salvaged."

I asked him if he would wish to talk more deeply about it. "Well, for that you need to talk to Baroness D'Souza. She's the one who really knows about it."

That's why a few months later I find myself entering the miniature airport security of the House of Lords, to be greeted by Frances D'Souza, who served as Speaker of the House of Lords until August 2016.

Armed with rather good parliamentary coffee in the House of Lords canteen, we begin talking about Marefat, and how it came to be. "I've had a long love affair with Afghanistan," D'Souza explains. "It's a very extraordinary country. If you look at the topography,

it's not possible to think of it being controlled by a central government. That was demonstrated amply by the Russian occupation, when the Soviets in all their mighty power had to fight province by province and valley by valley."

D'Souza was familiar with the country even before she visited it. She had produced a study in the early 1980s on the threat of famine in Afghanistan. Once the Twin Towers came down on September 11th 2001 – an event which, post-Covid, suddenly seems a long time ago – the country was open to visitors. For D'Souza, it wasn't an opportunity to pass up. Having entered the House of Lords as a Lord Temporal in 2004, she was ideally placed to do so. She recalls: "It was once again considered a safe place to be, and loads of refugees returned from Pakistan and Iran. I was then a governor of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which was an All-Party Parliamentary Group looking at political funding. We went out to Afghanistan to see what we could do."

This is how the world changes – by fortunate coincidence, yes, but also because good people also tend to be curious. If you fast forward 20 years it is possible to see thousands of girls who have been transformed by this decision.

But if Baroness D'Souza had simply gone to Afghanistan, the world would not have been nudged so decisively in the direction it was. Instead, she had the good luck to encounter Aziz Royesh. By their ensuing encounter a generation of girls have found their way into that most valuable thing of all: a first-rate education.

"I was introduced to him in Kabul, in Shahr-e Naw, close to the presidential palace," D'Souza recalls. I note now a special note in her voice – something encompassing awe, affection and deep

respect. I begin to sense I am about to hear about someone I need to hear about – that we all should hear about. "He was an extraordinary man," D'Souza continues. "About five feet tall but a force of nature. Sometimes you come across people who are born leaders. It was clear to me immediately that he was."

So what was Royesh's story? "He and his few friends and brothers had started some sort of school when they lived as refugees in Pakistan, which had the simple aim to teach children to read and write. But before that Aziz'd been a Mujahid during the Soviet occupation. He had arrived back into Afghanistan, essentially into a desert. It looked like Berlin after the war, and it was completely razed to the ground."

Aziz's situation was complicated by the fact that he is a Hazara, meaning that he is part of the Shia minority rather than the Sunni majority. In the complex world of the Middle East this created obstacles for Aziz: "The Hazara affinity is predominantly to Iran, which is a Shiite country. The Taliban war in the 1990s – a really vicious war – ran right through the Hazara area."

## A Momentous Meeting

The scene was set for what D'Souza describes as a 'momentous day'. The pair of them talked all night: "Aziz had taken over one building, and put a tarpaulin over the top in April. It was still very cold, although the snows were beginning to melt. There were no windows and it was a tiny hut divided in two with a sheet." So how was Aziz structuring the educational process? "He and his colleagues had two classes, and three shifts where they could take 12 students at a time. There was basically no space, no blackboard. But Aziz's passion in life was to educate girls."





Aziz couldn't have met anyone more likely to appreciate his project than D'Souza. "Having come from a development background, I firmly believe that the magic bullet of development is this: if you educate girls you get development," D'Souza explains. "He started talking to me, and though his English wasn't that good, we talked all night – about philosophy and feminism. I was very impressed with him. He had girls who were doing weaving in his rundown flat – that was the only income refugees could earn. So he had little seven-year-old girls doing carpet-weaving. Meanwhile, middle-aged women wanted to learn geometry so they could divide up their land."

This was education in a raw and exciting form. In its urgency and its authenticity, it wasn't the sort of encounter you could push to one aside.

When D'Souza returned to the UK, she leapt into action. "I thought the

best thing I could do was raise money for him – because I trusted him. But I also thought that a lot of money at that time would be the kiss of death so I tried to raise small amounts and see what he did with it. I wrote to 30 friends and colleagues and said: 'Would you be prepared to give £30 a month for six months?' People did. Dennis was the only one who came back to me and said, 'That's fine, but wouldn't you like more?'. I said: 'No'."

So what did Royesh do with the money? "He selected one of the larger buildings in this bombed-out patch of land and he put a roof on, windows in – and, really importantly, he put a heater in. That meant that by the time autumn came round, and all the firewood had gone, it was the only place for miles around which had heating. And so everyone came. It was an opportunity for Aziz to explain to mothers and fathers what he was trying to do, educating the girls and persuade them that it was safe."

And the notion of education being unsafe was, of course, an inheritance of the Taleban. "When girls went to school they had been whipped in the street by the Taleban. They needed quite a lot of persuading," D'Souza says.

But Royesh, it turns out, was persuasive. "Over the years, it grew," recalls D'Souza. "I started raising money. We had fundraising events, and Aziz set up a model school where teachers and students got training simultaneously. They also had vocational training. They taught mechanics and engineering and tailoring so that those who left at 14 or 15 could go and have jobs."

In spite of this, Royesh's interest remained academic. "Aziz had had a very impoverished background with virtually no education. He's one of these people who reveres education so he reveres those who have education." It is a precious insight into how valuable that commodity is. And it was this passion



Students reading Marefat Mirror, the school monthly journal.

which drove the expansion of Marefat.

Over the years, D'Souza made repeated visits. "I went to Afghanistan with these brown paper bags. He asked me to bring English copies of Bertrand Russell's books which I did." Again, the detail is significant. A true passion for education is often irrationally omnivorous – we feel the doors of the world fling open and want to rush in and grab everything we can, often in no particular order.

But always it was the girls who Aziz was prioritising. "His focus was on getting the girls into twelfth grade and then onto tertiary education," says D'Souza. "As an example of what he managed, the school got up to nearly 4,000 students." As astonishing as this achievement was, what really mattered was the quality of the education. "The Asian University for Women, a renowned university in Bangladesh, offered 15 scholarships every two years and girls applied from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan

and Nepal. Our girls won 11 of them."

It seemed that nothing could stop their success. Marefat had become an educational phenomenon: "We went on raising, and Aziz eventually built a whole new building, and an auditorium. To this day, I remain so proud he named that after me. The school became the St Paul's of Kabul."

I am so swept up in the success of the story that for some reason – though I know what happened in 2021 – I am unprepared for D'Souza's next sentence: "It was a thriving school, and then August 15th came."

#### Force of Nature

Yes, August 15th – the day of the Americans' botched withdrawal.

Aziz was in a very difficult position. He had dedicated his life to a project which had achieved success beyond his wildest imaginings, and yet he was in

undeniable danger. D'Souza outlines the severity of Aziz's predicament: "Aziz, by virtue of the fact that he's Hazara and educates girls, was particularly vulnerable to the Taleban and had had brushes with them before. He felt he had to get out: he had a son in California. So we got him to America."

I realise I need to meet Aziz. A few days later I'm on a Zoom call looking at a kindly man beaming back at me. He explains that it's his habit to wake at four in the morning – a detail which conveys his separateness from Western rhythms, linking him to the desert somehow. It is a reminder too that you can leave Afghanistan in person but never depart it in spirit.

Of course, Aziz's story is like D'Souza's but seen in reverse perspective – it is like an education version of Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, where all the participants remember something different about key events.





Aziz Royesh, speaking to the students in one of the morning gatherings

For instance, Royesh gives his version first meeting with D'Souza, and recalls his views on education as they were communicated to her at that time. This time around you can hear the quiet and authentic adamanche which swayed Frances all those years ago: "The core of the problem in Afghanistan was this patrimonial vision that you have – of a male-dominated vision of the community. Just educating the male members of the community cannot change everything: there will be a vacuum as you're missing the vision of half of that community – the female side."

Aziz also makes an interesting distinction: "I never felt the need to march on the slogans of woman rights: I just wanted to go with education, because this by itself can bring all these other developments. I think it was that which really sparked Frances' interest."

Royesh also recalls Frances D'Souza

entering Marefat for the first time – meaning that I get to see her through his eyes. Even at this distance Royesh is moved by the memory of D'Souza's first entrance into the life of the school: "One of my first impressions of Frances D'Souza is that she was the first to come in. She entered that murky corridor and in the midst of that darkness, she saw these beautiful well-dressed girls that had blue, you know, shirts and they had white scarves. And they stood to greet her and suddenly she ran out and shouted: "How beautiful they are!"

It is a moving image – these girls standing there in all their potential, suddenly confronted by the person who really will help them. Perhaps it even has a dreamlike quality.

Royesh also remembers what it was like when D'Souza's first money came in – and again there are some telling details: "I received a call from an Afghan friend of mine. This person said that he had

come from the UK and he had some gifts for me. I went downtown, and saw that there was an envelope with Frances' beautiful handwriting. I opened that and there was £2000 which had been raised by her 'Evening for Marefat' fundraiser at her home. I remember all those notes, in fives, tens, twenties and hundreds. Next year, she visited again and had brought £6500. She insisted that we should go and buy a plot as she said it would give prestige to the school, and boost its credibility."

With that money Aziz was able to afford a site in the desert. It wasn't immediately promising as a location. But then an amazing thing happened: "We went there and started laying the foundations," Royesh recalls. "We laid the cornerstone and began building the mud walls. This ignited a kind of interest among the community. Suddenly, people came and kept buying the plots around that and building their houses."



Marefat Painting Studio

I also hadn't realised until I spoke with Aziz what heights D'Souza's fundraising eventually obtained. In 2010 alone, D'Souza raised £253,000. Aziz recalls: "She sent that money and we used it for the building, and we established a very big auditorium that later was named after Frances. When she visited the school in 2016-17 she was known to the students as 'Auntie d'Souza'. "At the beginning, the families, the students, and especially the girls, were in love with her."

As it happens I have seen this auditorium in a recording of a Zoom call, which took place earlier this year. It is a large, airy space, and the children are ranged obediently in it. I see kindly teachers compering the call, while D'Souza takes notes in her study, and Aziz stands before a white wall, peering down at his creation – and also in some way at his past.

Sat here in London, it is difficult

to imagine how it would look in its architectural context. But I imagine it must soar and be visible for miles around. It ought to fill the heart of every person in that area with hope. But no doubt, it also infuriates the Taleban.

### Thoughts from Home

So what does the astonishing story of Marefat have to tell us about education? Royesh's methods are, in their essence, simple. This in turn opens up onto the possibility that here in the UK, we have made the simple complicated – to our own detriment. It might be, for instance, that we have prioritised pouring money into the schools system over promoting Marefat-style effective educational methods.

Royesh tells me: "If you want transformational education, you don't need many facilities. You just need a good way to talk to the people and to help them perceive something and

customize that with their own real life. We didn't wait for the professional faculty. We didn't wait for the equipment – and we didn't wait for the infrastructure. We just started."

And if you get that right, the effects can be catching. "For around five years or six years, we were the only private school in Afghanistan mainly with civic and girls-catered education. In 2021, there were more than 163 private schools just in these three districts of Western Kabul. Education had become a norm and communities were changed. There were hundreds of cultural centres, art centres, sports clubs. People embraced the idea, they stepped forward. The children were 95 per cent illiterate in early 2002. By 2021, 95 per cent of the population had become literate. Violence, especially violence against women had eradicated in the entire Hazara community. Street harassment was not seen in the Dashti Barchi area of western Kabul. Furthermore, not a single member of the





10th grade students celebrating the results of their final exams

clergy talked against democracy, human rights or girls' education. It seemed that an entire community of seven million people had been transformed."

This was a mass grassroots movement without parallel. It should give heart to anyone who feels change happens too slowly. Sometimes perhaps we are lobbying for the wrong kind of change, and have forgotten to bring our activism back to first principles, as Aziz did.

And yet, of course, we cannot avoid the tragic aspects of the story. Aziz tells me that the events of 2021 didn't come out of the blue. In 2009, Marefat experienced the first backlash from the fanatical clergy. Pupils from Marefat had protested publicly against legislation which had violated numerous women's rights, and their prominence as protestors led to terrifying scenes at the school. These now seem in retrospect like precursors of the still more tragic events of 2021.

Royesh recalls: "The clergy attacked; they sent their mob supporters. We had just sat down to class and they stormed the school. They were shouting, and raising slogans against me as a person, saying that they would execute me as an infidel. They said I was preaching Christianity, or that I was preaching secularism and liberalism. They charged the school with being a centre of espionage and prostitution."

The school sustained physical damage. "They broke the glass of the school, and they called for its destruction. They called for the execution of the administrators and the faculty and especially myself. That was really a harsh thing."

Royesh has a way with understatement. It sounds terrifying beyond contemplation – but then we inhabit cosy lives and Aziz is hardened to the sterner realities of life under the Taliban. But in that awful instance again, an

astonishing thing happened: "We had just one gate. So the students came and they made a human chain behind it – and they closed the gate, so the mobs couldn't enter the yard. Thousands of people gathered around the school, most of them the parents of the students who were worried about their children or those who had shown up just to watch."

Eventually a special force from the Ministry of Interior relieved them. Royesh continues the story: "The attack was on Wednesday. The school remained closed on Thursday. On Saturday, we reopened the school, just with the hope that if 15 per cent of the students returned it would be a victory for us. But surprisingly, more than 95 per cent of the students returned back hand-in-hand with their parents. That was really a very emotional moment for us. They came, and they showed their support for the school. They were the parents of more than 3,500 students."

If anybody doubts that education is a spiritual right which people will defend with their lives, then they need to hear this story.

#### 2021 and all that

Sadly, even this superb victory came to have a temporary feel in 2021 when the Americans left, and things really did unravel. D'Souza takes up the story: "It was incredibly difficult for him. If you're a Hazara and the Taliban are after you..." her voice trails off, as if unable to imagine how that must be.

She continues: "I don't blame Aziz for going at all. There are individuals at risk and we shouldn't discount that. The school closed. My immediate concern then was for my daughter [the journalist Christa D'Souza] to try to evacuate the girls. They got over 200 of them out, and got a deal with the Canadian government. They then got another 207 out who have been waiting in Islamabad since October, languishing in a hostel. We've raised enough to get them visas through the government."

And Marefat today? "Dennis and I are interested to see what we can do to enable Marefat and its unique educational experience to continue. We think we can't do that until we go. Once we've got most of our girls out, our priority should be to get the school going again."

And Aziz? He is currently writing his History of Marefat, and is vague about future plans. D'Souza has her suspicions: "It's clear to me that Aziz has very high political ambitions, and wants to be the leader of the Hazaras – and maybe of the Afghan people as a previous Hazara man was in times past. He was also extremely close to Ashraf Ghani during the presidential elections, and even wrote Ghani's manifesto. Ghani, though is a very curious fellow, and once he won

the presidency, completely ditched Aziz, he treated him very badly."

A Royesh presidency? Every presidency is a long shot before it happens – but just to imagine it is to realise that hope remains.

But what about the girls? Here D'Souza is understandably emotional: "The brightest and the best have left the country, which is a huge responsibility which we all feel. The only thing which is a mitigating factor is that it's quite common with Afghans to return to their country, so I think a lot of them will. One thing one shouldn't underestimate is that for 20 years we had this flawed but democratic process: a huge number of people became accustomed to it. They're unlikely to give that up in a hurry."

If you want a measure of what was achieved at Marefat then you have to hear the girls themselves. Their security is paramount and so we will not be revealing any names or locations. But here are some voices, translated from the Persian by Aziz, of girls talking on a recent Zoom call. This is the authentic sound of education, but also of liberation.

One girl says: "We study. We continue our education. Because we know that interrupting the course of education means our death and I am not ready to die now."

An optimist might say that a girl who has learned to talk like that can never die: it is the voice of irreversible enlightenment. Here is another: "We understand the Taliban. Most of them have not lived in the city and they are not familiar with the characteristics of urban life. I hope they understand us too. We will continue our education and I am sure that we will eventually introduce the Taliban with the urban life and culture too."

There is a note of defiance here which is utterly at odds with what we think we know about Afghan women – bowed down by the patriarchy, and almost without agency. It makes us realise that Royesh, D'Souza and Stevenson have created a new kind of educated woman.

**"We study.  
We continue our  
education. Because  
we know that  
interrupting the  
course of education  
means our death and  
I am not ready to  
die now."**

A third girl adds: "We call our resistance a 'constructive resilience'. We not only resist, but also think about the constructive aspect of our resistance. We think that in ten years or twenty years from now, we will make our culture better and more humane, and our politics better and more democratic. This is the purpose of our education."

This is in fact always the purpose of education – and sometimes it takes someone who knows education's value to tell you that. That will almost always be someone who until recently was deprived of it.

This, then, is the story of Marefat. There isn't another story like it, and it's one we at Finito World will continue to follow. It tells us that education is sacred, and reminds us that it changes lives. **f**



# AN INDELIBLE MARK: SHANE WARNE: 1969 - 2022



BY CHRISTOPHER JACKSON

**O**n 4th March 2022, Shane Warne, the greatest bowler of all time, told his 3 million Twitter followers: ‘Sad to hear the news that Rod Marsh has passed. He was a legend of our great game & an inspiration to so many young boys & girls. Rod cared deeply about cricket & gave so much – especially to Australia & England players. Sending lots & lots of love to Ros & the family. RIP mate’

Incomprehensibly, today those words apply to him – though he is six or seven items down the news due to the Russia-Ukraine war. Warne deserves far more than to be a footnote on a day of conflict: he belongs instead to that superior condition of peace. He chose to use all his talent and ingenuity towards entertaining us and making us happier.

Sometimes, when someone dies, you will hear that they were ‘one of the greats’ but Warne was something else: he was the greatest. Muttiah Muralitharan – his only serious rival in the Test arena – might have more wickets, but Warne’s stature was of another kind. When Warne came along, the very notion of leg spin was more or less deemed to be antiquated. The 1980s had been notable mainly as a period of West



(Image source: Wikipedia)

Indian fast bowling – a time of rangy giants approaching the wicket to unleash unplayable deliveries at 90 mph plus. They were very unlike Warne, with his fluctuating weight and cheeky guile. As if to prove these fears, Warne’s first test match figures were a disappointment: 1-150 against India at Sydney. But in time he would prosper – and then to his own surprise outstrip all his competitors. He once said that 400 wickets was 400 than he thought he would get. By the time he got to 708 he said: “Look, that’s a hell of a lot of wickets.”

Furthermore, has there ever been someone who left a discipline so absolutely unlike the condition he found it in? One has to think of Federer in tennis, reintroducing guile to a sport which had been dominated by big servers. If you rewatch the so-called Ball of the Century with the original commentary, then you can hear how the commentator doesn’t initially know that the batsman has been bowled: Mike Gatting wasn’t the only one taken by surprise by Warne.

The case of Warne also raises the

question of how he managed to improve so dramatically from that underwhelming first appearance. All cricketers who graduate from first class cricket into the Test arena face a dramatic change where they either sink or swim. In cricket, county cricket stars like Graeme Hick or Mark Ramprakash never quite found greatness, though you would have assumed from their records before playing Test cricket that they’d have easily made the transition.

It is in the mind – as it is with all careers. My sense is that some people come into a right sense of time – of how small the window is to succeed or fail. They realise that it’s now or never – and rather than finding that a stressful or depressing thought find it a motivating or even unburdening one, and then proceed to capitalise. It increases their sense of controlled gamble and they never look back. This is what I think happened to Warne: he fed at the right time off the right energy within himself.

To those who lived through it, 2005 will always be the golden summer for cricket. It cannot be separated out from Warne as a cricketer and a person, though Freddie Flintoff played a similarly important role for England. I will never forget the way Warne was bigger somehow even that the defeat Australia suffered at the Oval, bowling his heart out – and looking like he was enjoying himself immensely even as the odds grew harder. He seemed to love bowling particularly against Kevin Pietersen; like all the best, he wanted to play against the best.

Warne loved playing in England, and relished the ribbing nature of the rivalry. Notice in the Rod Marsh tweet at the top of this article how casually England is snuck in alongside Australia in his sentiments. There is an unconscious Anglophilia there which will be missed.



Shane Warne bowling for the Rajasthan Royals against Middlesex at Lords in 2009  
(Image source: Wikipedia)

Humour had its role in Warne’s life too. During one Ashes series, Ian Bell – who has tweeted a moving tribute this afternoon – was labelled by Warne the Sherminator because of his resemblance to a character in the film American Pie. On another occasion when Bell was sledging Warne when Warne when he was at the crease, he looked at Bell in the slips and retorted magnificently: “You mate, are making me concentrate.” He went on to score his highest Test innings. It was a taunt by someone who knew his greatness; Test Match cricket had become a playground for him.

People will say he was flawed, and of course he was – but grandly so. This love of life made him inclusive and infectious: by the end of his relatively short life he was loved as much as he was revered, both in Australia and

England. From the outside looking in, he seems to have had a rocky emotional life but this was balanced, if the tributes from all over the world are anything to go by, by a capacity for friendship.

There is a sense of great loss today which can only be countered by the old unattributed remark: “Is there cricket in heaven? Of course there is. It wouldn’t be heaven without it, would it?” If that’s the case then perhaps we might imagine Warne running into bowl. Donald Bradman is at the crease; Jack Hobbs is at the other end. Gary Sobers is keeping wicket.

What kind of God would go around creating a universe without letting that happen? As the umpire says at the start of each match: play. [f](#)



# Larry David v Dave Chapelle

BY CHRISTOPHER JACKSON

**A**ll the talk of the 21st century belonging to the Chinese isn't likely to have been reduced by the spectacle of the Biden administration foreign policy in both Afghanistan and Ukraine.

But there is no doubt that the 'demise of America' narrative can be overblown. According to the Global Power Index, America remains ahead of all other countries on account of its economic, cultural and military power. It is too soon to announce its irrelevance, even if the image of an elderly president sometimes struggling to grasp the detail of problems does make one think inevitably of a decline straight out of the works of Edward Gibbon.

The truth is that America still matters, even if – and perhaps especially if – it can sometimes seem notable by its absence. Its economic policy continues to influence ours if only because it accounts for 14.7 per cent of all exports (as of 2021), including everything from boilers and nuclear equipment (\$10.5 billion in 2021), vehicles (\$8.19 billion), and pharmaceuticals (\$5.10 billion).

As important as these statistics are, they feel limited as they can't take into account the enormous impact of our cultural relationship. Not only is there the raw economics, but the back and forth of entertainment. The best statistic here is the number of streaming subscribers in the UK of channels dominated by an American understanding of the world. At the end of 2021, the number of Netflix subscribers stood at 14 million, a slight dip of 750,000 on the previous year. This is due to an increase of subscribers to



Larry David and Jeff Garlin on the set of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*

Amazon which now has around 12.3 million and Disney which has swiftly taken considerable market share at 4.7 million. Is it any wonder that one often encounters people in the UK who speak with a slight New York or Californian accent, or that 'wokeness', a term coined in the US civil rights movement in the 1960s, should now be such a live issue within British society and in the British workplace?

## Larry v Dave

NowTV meanwhile stands at 2.2 million. In the context, that might not be worth mentioning, except for one important point: it is probably the best way to watch Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-) – henceforth *Curb*

as it is known to its fans.

Meanwhile, over on Netflix you can find the majority of the output of Dave Chappelle, a comedian whose worldview might on first inspection seem similar to David's. This however turns out to be an illusion. Both Larry and Dave might be interviewed by David Letterman from time to time; each has starred on Jerry Seinfeld's entertaining but slightly toe-curlingly chummy *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* (2012-); and both, of course, can make you laugh. To Brits, they are equally gigantic figures, sitting astride a huge economy: unfathomably rich spokespeople. They are creatures of power – and they probably don't know from their American citadels how international

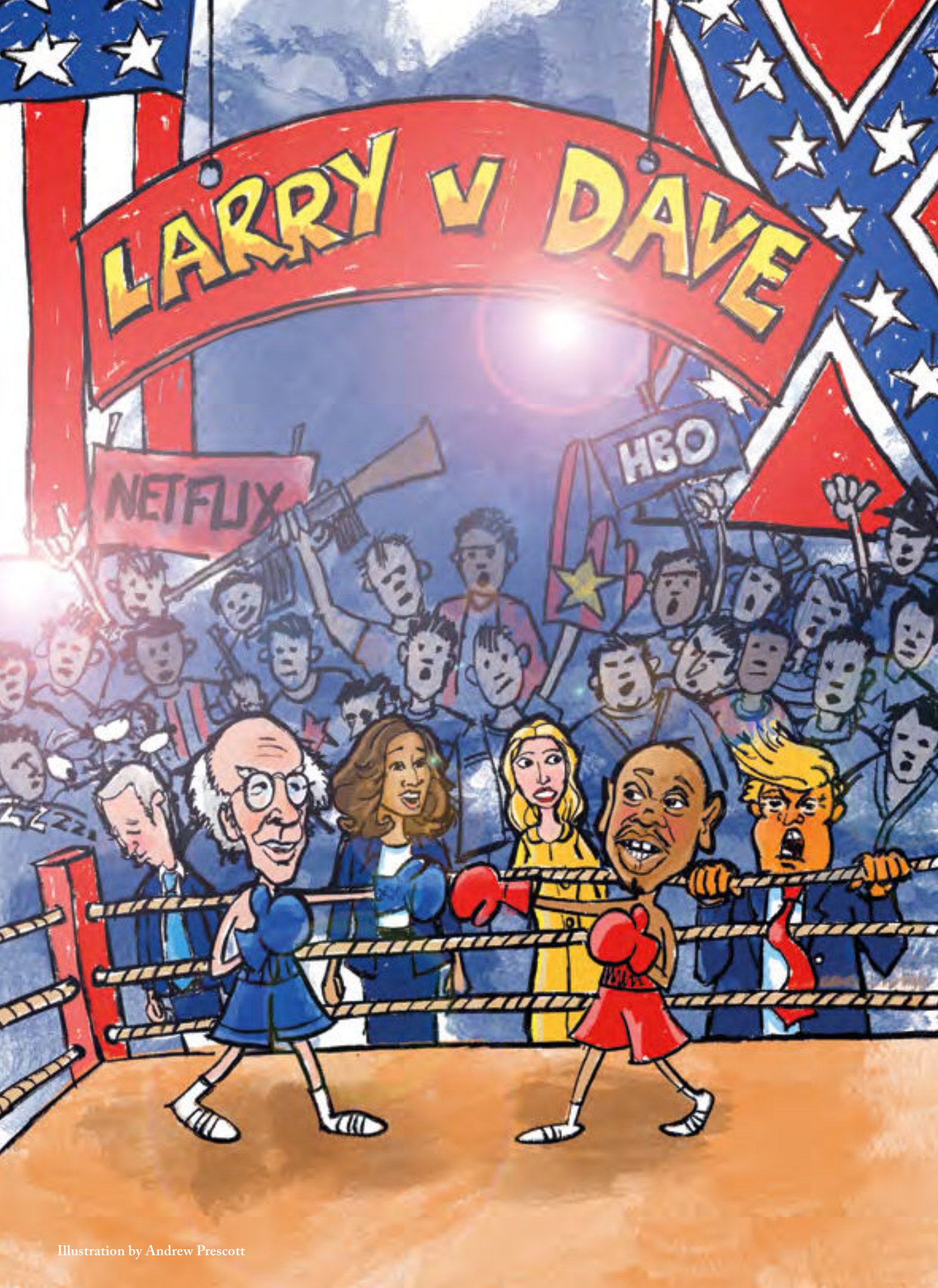


Illustration by Andrew Prescott



their influence is, and might not care if they did. Even our own countrymen, Stewart Lee and Russell Howard do not seem to have comparable influence on our lives. Meanwhile, those who are of comparable importance such as Ricky Gervais and Steve Coogan have either moved to America (Gervais) or conquered the American market (Coogan). Both have paid court to David but not, so far as I'm aware, to Chappelle.

But if you watch each show, and follow through the implications of each laugh, you begin to realise that not only do Chappelle and David inhabit different worlds, but their worlds appear to be drifting further apart in a way which seems to say more about modern America than any statistic could.

#### Biographical clues

The clues are there when you look at

the biographies of the two comedians. There have long been two Americas – the Conservative heartlands and the liberal coastlines.

The first of these is a predominantly rural world where the blue collar worker retains roots to the past. These states continually vote Republican and have pockets of Confederate sympathy. Here, gun ownership is an aspect of an immemorial tradition which dates back to the civil war and beyond, and where conservative social attitudes – especially opposition to abortion and a queasiness about the gains of the so-called LGBTQ movement – still dominate society.

The second is an urban counterpart: a place of crime, yes, but also of tolerance, of wealth, of kale milkshakes and sneakers – and above all, tech. In these places modernity reliably reigns. This has its political ramifications. At each presidential election, Democrats do well in the big

cities, and among minorities – especially African Americans, and to a lesser extent, Latinos. The Republicans meanwhile have tended to do well in the south. All this is the legacy of Nixon's controversial southern strategy, which was intended to cement the white vote, arguably by driving a racial wedge through the electorate.

The above is a simplification in many respects which is explored in different ways by both David and Chappelle. And yet it remains broadly useful: it is an aspect of American life which occurs too often to be discarded. It is also, as we see in the result of the 2016 EU referendum in Britain and in the recent French elections, an aspect of many modern societies.

#### Life of Larry

Larry David comes from the second of these Americans. He is a predominantly urban creature. He grew up in New York; one amusing leitmotif of his comedy is to parody his own distance



Season 11 of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* divided critics



JB Smoove is one of the stars of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*

from nature (though this hasn't stopped him advocating for strong climate change policies). He once joked about his upbringing: "I grew up in Brooklyn. Of all the wonders and pleasures that Mother Earth has bestowed upon us, none of them could be found in Brooklyn."

David continues: "There was nothing in nature we appreciated. Sunsets were mocked. The moon, in particular, held no fascination for anyone. I don't think I ever heard anyone even use it in a sentence. Nobody ever said, 'Hey, check out the moon!' We never gazed at it. We didn't do any gazing."

In *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, David's long-suffering wife Cheryl, persuades Larry to go to the beach. He gesticulates at the sea and says, "I don't get this fascination that people have with the ocean." Cheryl replies: "Doesn't it make you feel calm?" "No, it makes me feel aggravated that I don't get something which other people

are getting." The perennial image of David is of someone schlepping through LA in the brilliant sunshine, amused by the quirks of the social code as it arises in cities.

Sometimes an aspect of rural America will intrude on his life. In Season 11 – which aired at the end of 2021 – Larry bumps into a Klu Klux Klan member and accidentally spills coffee over his outfit. The comedy of the situation is that Larry then bends over backwards to make sure he rectifies that wrong by taking it upon himself to do his laundry. This in turn leads to an encounter with a cow on a farm: a rare moment in *Curb* when we leave the streets of LA.

The Larry character in *Curb* doesn't need to work since he is based on a counterpart of David's own self who has long ago achieved unimaginable wealth thanks to the syndication of *Seinfeld* episodes. He has infinite leisure to follow up on any quirk of modern

morality – to question an urban society which constantly seems to him to be filled with surreptitious selfishness, or contradiction.

It can make for remarkably rich comedy. But sometimes it reveals its limits unknowingly. There was a story recently of Larry David at Martha's Vineyard bumping into Alan Dershowitz. Dershowitz, a constitutional lawyer best known today for having spent much more time with Jeffrey Epstein than most would think acceptable, was astonished to be accosted by David who began to quiz Dershowitz about his ties to the Trump administration.

According to reports, Dershowitz told David, "We can still talk, Larry." David replied, "No. No. We really can't. I saw you. I saw you with your arm around [former Trump Secretary of State Mike] Pompeo! It's disgusting!"

We might very well disapprove of the Trump administration, but there is



just a whiff here of censorship, of the inability to understand why someone should wish to hold a certain viewpoint – and therefore seek to suppress that viewpoint at the same time.

Dershowitz later summarised his views about the encounter: “Larry is a knee-jerk radical. He takes his politics from Hollywood. He doesn’t read a lot. He doesn’t think a lot,” adding, “It’s typical of what happens now on the Vineyard... People won’t talk to each other if they don’t agree with their politics.”

As it turns out, David was in Martha’s Vineyard in the first place to celebrate that notably hypocritical gathering, former President Barack Obama’s 60th birthday party. This unmasked affair showed all too clearly the real feelings of powerful people on the left about pandemic era restrictions: that they could be jettisoned when they felt like it.

Curb Your Enthusiasm itself sometimes displays something like this narrowness. In a recent episode David goes to pitch his latest comedy to Hulu and has some easy banter with the TV studio types. David points to three executives on the couch: ‘Did they like it?’ Then, mindful of the way in which pronouns are changing, he points to one of them: “Are you a ‘they’?” She says: “I’m only a they when I’m with other people.” David points to the next person and says: “Are you a they?” “No, I’m gay.”

This is fine in all respects except a crucial one: it isn’t funny. In many other situations in Curb, David will double down on an absurdity like this; he will probe and examine behaviour and say the hitherto unsayable. An equivalent scene might involve David questioning woke orthodoxy. But instead here, he laughs and waves it away. He can’t imagine a society where gender fluidity is challengeable and therefore

a potential subject of humour. In reneging on a real joke here, he shows his acceptance of a particular kind of leftist politics. Powerful as he is, he can’t go up against it – it would leave him friendless in the cities – New York and LA – where he has his home.

### Sense of Community

By contrast, Dave Chappelle grew up in Ohio and despite acquiring great fame and riches, returned there. His comedy is shot through with a profound sense of community – both in respect of the locality, Yellow Springs, where he has spent his life, and in respect of his commitment to understand the African-American experience.

In Larry David’s world, community is occasionally glanced off – for instance, there is one episode based around a man with a toupée’s apparent treachery against the bald community. But more generally, David’s sense of allegiance is to Hollywood. This is the case both in respect of those narratives which revisit his friendships with Julia Louis Dreyfus, Jason Alexander and Jerry Seinfeld and in the almost endless stream of celebrity cameos.

His allegiance to the Jewish community is, of course, implicit throughout although it is interesting that this is constantly subverted. For instance, in an early episode he insists on the right to sing a passage from Wagner’s beautiful instrumental Siegfried Idyll. When someone overhears him and calls him ‘a self-hating Jew’, Larry retorts: ‘I may hate myself but it has nothing to do with being Jewish’. This is a brilliant episode, which asserts an essentially secular narrative whereby Wagner’s anti-Semitism isn’t sufficient reason to ignore the magnificent music he was able to compose.

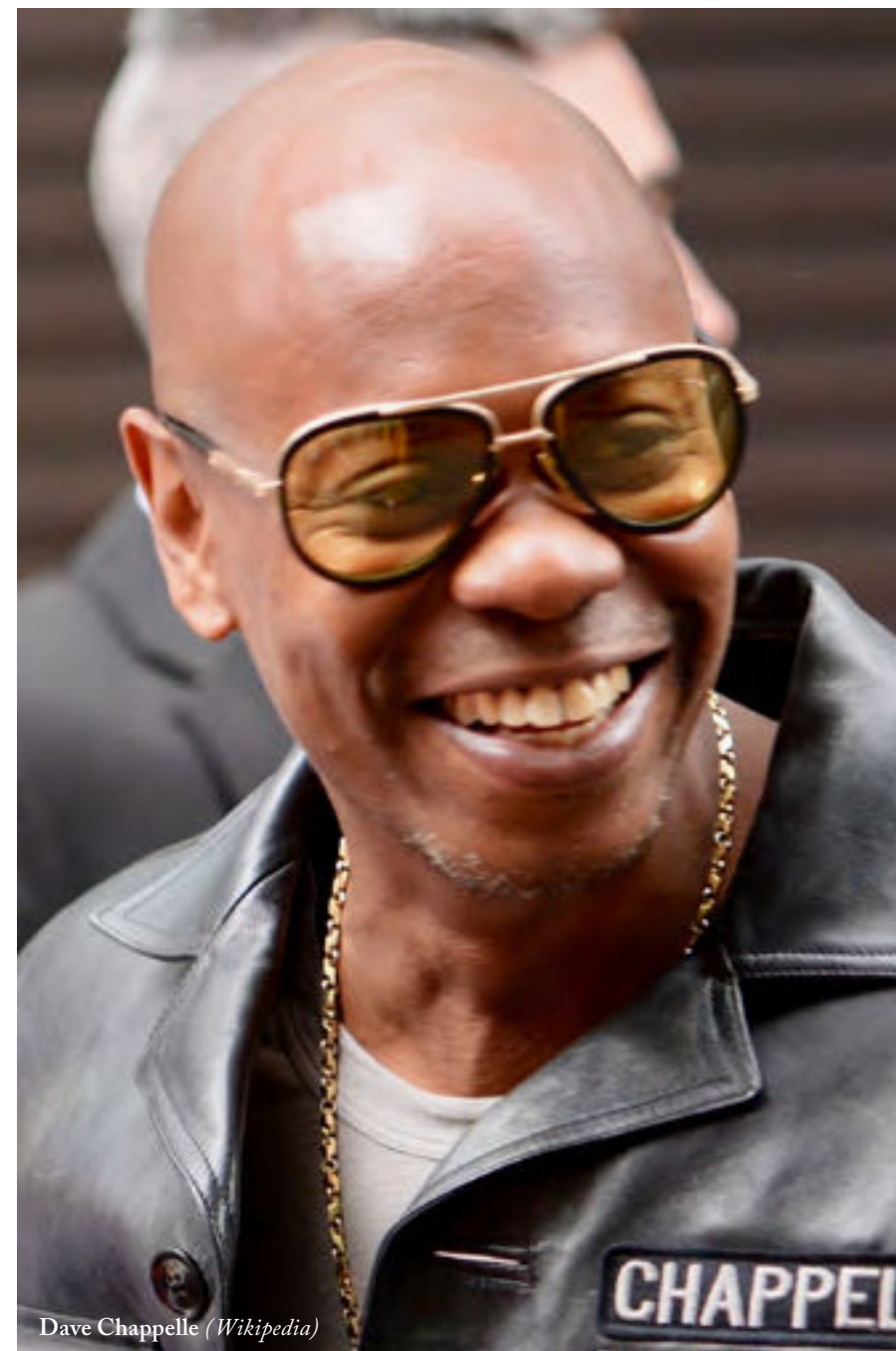
David’s Jewishness is primarily tied

to his justified sense of belonging to a long list of brilliant Jewish comedians, through Mel Brooks, who has appeared in Curb, and Woody Allen who hasn’t. (David though did appear in Allen’s 2009 flop Whatever Works). He belongs to his fellow comedians. As so often happens when people become famous, they prefer to be around people who have gone through similarly surreal experiences, of becoming known and talked about, photographed and idolised, and misunderstood – and deemed immortal when mortality remains their lot.

There is a world of difference in others words between David’s essentially secular relationship with Judaism, and Chappelle’s profound exploration in his comedy of the African-American experience. Both are funny comedians, but Chappelle is the braver. Chappelle has what George Orwell, though never the funniest of men, called in relation to his own polemical talent, ‘a power of facing unpleasant facts.’

Czappelle won fame and riches with Chappelle’s Show, but decided to tear down the show rather than not be true to himself. In one standup show, around the time when he was considering departure, Chappelle found himself interrupted by members of the audience yelling a catchphrase from the show “I’m Rick James, bitch.” Chappelle left the stage and when he returned said: “This show is ruining my life.”

Precisely what triggered his eventual departure – which did him immense short-term financial damage – is still a mystery although we know a little more now after an interview with David Letterman on Netflix’s slightly embarrassingly named My Next Guest Needs No Introduction. Here, Chappelle talks of a laugh having been too easily won – enough to make him queasy about the whole nature of the



Dave Chappelle (Wikipedia)

comedy he was practising at that time. He said: “I was doing sketches that were funny but socially irresponsible. I felt I was deliberately being encouraged and I was overwhelmed.” On another occasion, he said: “The hardest thing is to be true to yourself, especially when everybody’s watching.”

Comedy is here deemed to be of the utmost importance; Chappelle is proclaiming that it matters at the level of the soul. I can’t see that anybody else has spoken about comedy in this way before.

Being true to himself meant returning to the circuit, and playing comedy clubs. He would rebuild his art. Inso doing, he has made sure that he has done more than anyone alive to ensure it merits this noun. He has done so by making sure he isn’t only funny. He is also thought-provoking.

The Chappelle art can be seen on Netflix in a series of specials: Equanimity (2017), The Bird Revelation (2017), Sticks and Stones (2019) and most recently The Closer (2021).

All these have been to some extent maligned by the transgender community, but there has been a sense of mounting rage since The Closer, which caused a good deal of disquiet at Netflix, leading to a showdown where some employees walked out.

This particular special needs to be watched rather than pontificated about.

In the first place, what is it saying? Chappelle is predominantly motivated in his comedy by community, and by a desire to not let the black American experience of marginalisation be backgrounded by another marginalisation – that of the trans people. He doesn’t say that ‘wokeness’ or the plight of the LGBTQ movement is a symptom of white privilege – but he does categorically reserve his rights to make jokes about that possibility. He is saying that it is not off limits, and he’s right about that. In truth, sensitivity is often funny as it hints at insecurity; this in turn suggests some kind of incompleteness within society, meaning that a joke in that direction contains the possibility of catharsis. This is what Nietzsche meant when he wrote that a joke is an epitaph on the death of a feeling. Sensitivities deserve to be laughed away if they are ultimately groundless. This is different to mocking what is sacred. In fact, true sacredness can stand to be mocked since it will have a secure basis in fact.

In Chappelle’s case, he is surely right that we must resist the temptation to say: ‘I am persecuted’ – especially if you will then be upset to hear the retort, ‘No you’re not.’ And what makes him able to say this? It is the whole gigantic inheritance of slavery, an experience which really was appalling, and which really does take some getting over. He is insisting on his right to check whether trans persecution is definitely persecution seen by the harsh light



of the African-American experience. Insodoing he is speaking up for the freedoms people already have, so that they cannot be better protected.

At times, Chappelle’s humour automatically aligns him with those feminists who have been prepared to affirm the primacy of gender in their own experience, most famously JK Rowling. Here is Chappelle’s most shocking joke in *The Closer*, with apologies to the faint-hearted for the bad language: “Gender is a fact. Every human being in this room, every human being on Earth, had to pass through the legs of a woman to be on Earth. That is a fact. Now, I am not saying that to say trans women aren’t women, I am just saying that those pussies that they got ... you know what I mean? I’m not saying it’s not pussy, but it’s Beyond Pussy or Impossible Pussy. It tastes like pussy, but that’s not quite what it is, is it? That’s not blood, that’s beet juice.”

One must first note the compression: it took JK Rowling thousands of words to say this on her blog – and there were no laughs, and so no Nietzschean catharsis. Her seriousness has left her far more vulnerable to attack than Chappelle. When the LGBTQ community reacted to this, there was talk of Chappelle attending a meeting with campaigners within Netflix.

Chappelle’s statement was typically robust: “I said what I said, and boy, I heard what you said. My God, how could I not? You said you want a safe working environment at Netflix. It seems like I’m the only one that can’t go to the office anymore.”

In the special itself, Chappelle also details the beautiful story of Chappelle’s friendship with Daphne Doran, a trans woman comedian. In the special Chappelle recalls Doran saying: “I don’t need you to understand me. I just need

you to believe I’m having a human experience.”

In actual fact, nothing could be more affirming about Doran’s experience than Chappelle’s brilliant set. As Andrew Sullivan put it in *The Weekly Dish*: “And, through the jokes, that’s what Chappelle is celebrating: the individual human, never defined entirely by any single “identity,” or any “intersectional” variant thereof. An individual with enough agency to be able to laugh at herself, at others, at the world, an individual acutely aware of the tension between body and soul, feelings and facts, in a trans life, as well as other kinds of life.”

And so there’s a paradox here: that Chappelle’s understanding of community is built on the freedom of the individual, not on herd mentality.

If this is compared to the scene with Larry David in the Hulu office, we can see how far apart the two are: David’s sense of community is too cosy, it’s to do with leaving those alone who might cancel you, because that would be very tiring.

It is difficult to imagine anyone at any streaming service walking out after seeing a Larry David special. He’s not near enough the edge for that anymore, though he once was.

Inflexible politics always works against comedy. David’s sense of self is to do with being a Democrat – and specifically, a donor to the Democratic Party. As Dershowitz points out, Larry David is probably in the last analysis not particularly interested in politics, and it’s this which makes him vulnerable to being political since he’s unable to see, for instance, the flaws in the Democratic Party, or really how similar the two main parties are in the United States.



A young Dave Chappelle (*Wikipedia*)

There is a scene in the tenth episode of the fourth season of *Curb* called ‘Opening Night’ where David is finally about to hook up with Cady Hauffman. As they are kissing, David spies a portrait of George W. Bush on her dressing-room wall and breaks off the embrace. “Are you – a Republican?” Hauffman rolls her eyes: “Yes, Larry.”

It’s a funny scene because it highlights Larry’s own dogmatism: it satirises the polarisation of America. Larry David the Democrat can’t let go his dislike of the 43rd President just for a moment, or even explore whether that dislike of Bush is relevant enough at that point to suspend a possible romance. But at the same time, the question remains: “Does David know enough about politics to be sure the joke is as funny as he thinks it is?” Christopher Meyer recently noted in Iain Dale’s *The Presidents* that George W. Bush was intelligent on first meeting: this is not information that can co-exist with this scene.

David recently gave an interview at the ‘Netflix is a Joke’ festival where he was asked why he hadn’t been cancelled yet. “It’s a very good question. I don’t know why. I don’t like to think about

it too much.” The answer is that he has challenged every orthodoxy apart from Democratic-Hollywood orthodoxy. David famously appeared on *Saturday Night Live* in the lead-up to Trump’s election and called him a racist. The appearance had a staged feel and probably only served to normalise Trump on national television. But it showed that David’s thought is often reductive: Bush is stupid, Trump is a racist. A man who is unparalleled at reading nuance in the situations people get themselves into, can’t apply those gifts to high politics.

It’s for this reason that it’s impossible to imagine David being rugby-tackled by someone on stage as happened to Dave Chappelle recently. Chappelle’s political comedy is more nuanced. In *Equanimity*, he describes Trump supporters as ‘decent folk’ adding that he ‘felt sorry for them’. Chappelle continues in that hypnotic voice of his: ‘I saw some angry faces and some determined faces, but they felt like decent folk... I know the game now. I know that rich white people call poor white people ‘trash.’ And the only reason I know that is because I made so much money last year, the rich whites told me they say it at a cocktail party.’

In this we see how both Chappelle – and David – might be termed rich outsiders. Both play on this. But what is crucial is where you end up living once you become famous. David is one of LA’s most famous residents. As the commentator Dr Randall Heather recently told me: “The thing to know about California is it’s really another planet”.

It’s Chappelle who has retained that sense of place – enough to attend a 2022 council meeting around a housing proposal in Yellow Springs, Ohio – and who therefore has his ear

to the ground. Insofar as he can be, Chappelle is accessible. In the Trump passage I quoted above, he is to some extent alongside his fellow people, as is shown in the punchline: “I stood with them in line like all Americans are required to do in a democracy – nobody skips the line to vote – and I listened to them. I listened to them say naive poor white people things,” he said. “Man, Donald Trump’s gonna go to Washington and he’s gonna fight for us”. “I’m standing there thinking in my mind, ‘You dumb motherfucker. ... You are poor. He’s fighting for me.”

### The Unforgiven

Chappelle’s is a new kind of comedy: it is incantatory. Whole passages can pass without a joke – and his jokes when they come are never predictable. It is a highwire act. We watch him delving the truth, yes, but sometimes the experience can be more uncomfortable than that: it can be as if he is probing you, the viewer. You emerge on the other side of his sets changed – as Chappelle no doubt did too in the writing of them. Larry David’s comedy contains marvellous moments – if you don’t know David’s comedy, just google ‘Palestinian chicken’. But his comedy, rooted in Hollywood mores and assumptions, doesn’t seem to work quite so well in the post-woke landscape since it cannot, without alienating his audience, address the question at all.

This means that David will, more and more, have to resort to slapstick comedy which is the opposite of the incantatory humour of Chappelle. This isn’t necessarily terminal as David is good at this kind of comedy: one of the abiding images of *Curb* is of David grimacing as he looks back while someone ridiculously chases him down the sunny streets of California. In another episode *The Bare Midriff*, the episode ends with David

hilariously hanging off a building, clutching at a girl’s tummy. I’ve always thought that this episode showed David at his best: like Tom Stoppard does in *After Magritte*, it was as if he had worked backwards from a preposterous image to figure out how we got there. It is gloriously silly. Comedy should always have room to be that. It might even be said that Chappelle doesn’t have David’s range, not least because he is working in the monologue form and David has successfully updated the comedy drama.

But it is Chappelle’s comedy that is for this time – however uncomfortable that might make some of us feel, and however difficult that might be for all of us to say. The eleventh season of *Curb* finally showed David running out of invention, adrift in 2021, whereas Chappelle is very much of it.

But we need both of them, because both are revolutionaries. The great sitcoms of the UK function on the basis of the predicament of the man in the middle of society, who must both suck up but is also able to punch down. Basil Fawlty has Manuel to berate, but must placate his wife and his guests. Alan Partridge has Lynne to do his bidding, but longs to please the TV bosses who might return him to fame. David Brent has Gareth beneath him, but head office, in the shape of Neil, above him, and so on and so forth.

David’s achievement is to create a comedy around someone who is financially impregnable and feels no need whatsoever to impress anyone. If *Seinfeld* was, famously, a show about nothing, then *Curb*, is a show about someone who cares about nothing. Perhaps it is even the first true atheistic comedy, in that the protagonist feels no existential anxiety whatsoever: this liberates Larry, the character, to oppose what he views as absurd in the people around him.





Ted Danson also appears in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*

Chappelle's comedy is to an extent few have realised religious comedy, albeit delivered in a secular setting. Chappelle is a Muslim convert, but he has also been called by Christianity Today, the 'cultural pastor we need'.

He has said: "I don't normally talk about my religion publicly because I don't want people to associate me and my flaws with this beautiful thing. And I believe it is beautiful if you learn it the right way." When Chappelle talks about this side of his life more elaborately to David Letterman, we are left with a sense of man for whom comedy has a profound moral purpose. It is a comedy which looks to transcend spiritual anxiety.

#### Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word

And so we are left with two comedians who represent two Americas which are becoming increasingly separate from one another – as we see every time an election rolls around. The question arises as to whether these two versions of America can be reconciled with one another.

It would be foolish to place limits on what is possible, especially in America, that most dynamic of places. But one

interesting leitmotif in both comedians is apology. Larry's character is always saying sorry: "I'm apologising all day!" as he says in one episode. But it is always a sorry which is done out of expediency: he will be saying sorry again tomorrow. Again, David's is not a comedy which leads to discovery, but which instead orbits a set of received truths.

Chappelle, too, has his stubborn streak. As he put it in his famous statement following the furore at Netflix over *The Closer*: "I am more than willing to give you an audience, but you will not summon me. I am not bending to anybody's demands." My sense is that these two Americas will never in the end apologise to one another, just as Trump won't admit defeat in the 2020 elections.

Is comedy ever forgiving? You have to go quite a long way back for that. Since the satire boom of the 1960s, where comedy was aimed specifically at authority, the very notion of comedy has drifted free of its original meaning.

In its essence a comedy is a story where the characters come to a prosperous conclusion. That is why Dante could write so much about Hell and still call

his book a *Commedia* – because the protagonist ends up in Heaven. Likewise in Shakespeare's comedies, as in Dickens' novels, there is always a certain sorting at the end where the good end well, and the evil are punished. Marriages happen; it's forgotten that there's such a thing as funerals. David has done more than anyone since Dickens to restore the word to its original meaning. His LA really can seem a place of no death. If we take moral evil as the only death we should really fear, then we can see that Chappelle's comedy wishes to defeat death.

Whether reconciliation is possible for the United States of America remains to be seen. But the country is plainly large enough to admit almost any paradox: it is kind and cruel, beautiful and ugly, funny and serious and so on. It evolves and alters, and has always been a place of unusual hope – and forgiveness can be catching when it does spring up. But for now, it is clearly in a state of acute tension. To see that, all you have to do is go to Now TV or Netflix and press play. <sup>f</sup>

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# How the Finito Bursary scheme changed my life

TUSHAR KUMAR

**As I sat in the carriage of the train watching the Midlands countryside go by, I couldn't believe how excited I was about my future. I had just spent the day having lunch as the guest of Finito Education in a private members' club in London. Only a few months before, I could remember being anxious and worried about how my future would turn out.**

A year or so earlier I had been working hard at school. My A-levels of Biology, Physics and Chemistry were aimed at getting me into a career in medicine, but for numerous reasons that turned out not to be the case. As a student at the Landau Forte College in Derby I, along with a small handful of other Upper Sixth Form students, were asked to attend a briefing on Finito Education. It was there I met Andy Inman, one of the mentors from Finito. He was there to describe the service that they give in mentoring and networking on behalf of their clients and mentees. Normal clients of Finito have to pay for this significant advantage in life, and here we were in an inner-city school in central Derby being offered the opportunity to become the first bursary mentees of Finito.

Knowing that it would be daft not to take the opportunity, I volunteered along with a number of my school friends and was later introduced to my first business mentor Robin Rose. He had been mentoring for many years, and he was very patient and kind while taking me through regular Zoom video call



Tushar Kumar

sessions explaining how recruitment would work as I left education. Robin set up a number of opportunities for me. However, because of distractions that I was facing at home I didn't make the most of them. Sadly, one of my A-level grades meant that my aspirations for a career in Medicine were not going to happen, and floundering around a little I grasped the idea of becoming a pilot.

Finito works with a broad network of mentors, and because of my pilot career suggestion I was handed back to Andy Inman who had briefed me and several of my school friends a few months beforehand. He had 30 years' experience as a military pilot, and over the course of several Zoom sessions he opened my eyes to the possibilities of becoming a pilot while also being realistic about the harsh realities involved in getting there, both financially and in how long it would need my concerted effort. He introduced me to several people, from

the Senior Instructor at a local airfield to newly qualified pilots working towards airline jobs. He also put me in touch with the head of the Royal Air Force pilot training system at RAF Brize Norton. I was amazed at the breadth of the network that Finito was able to introduce me to, and even more so by the time and effort that those I was introduced to were willing to spend on helping me.

**“Finito took time to work out what was making me tick.”**

It was at this point that I really started to lose hope about what the future might hold for me. A serious medical condition as well as family disruption at home meant that I dropped out and stopped returning the calls from Andy. I remember the last message from him via



WhatsApp saying he would give me some space for now, but the door would always remain open for getting back into the mentor scheme.

After a few months my home life became more stable and I decided it was important to re-engage with Finito, so I contacted Andy and asked if it would be possible to start afresh. It was clear from his response that he was delighted I was coming back to the fold, and we started regular chats about how to progress things while I was applying to go to Nottingham University later in the coming year.

Finito took time to work out what was making me tick. It was clear that I had an entrepreneurial spirit - a couple of years earlier I had made a successful business from selling sneakers online. I had a strong work ethic and Andy dug down into what I enjoyed, where my skills lay, and how that would fit into a future working career. I was shown how to craft emails to companies, how to conduct myself in an interview and how to best come across in a telephone call.

At the same time, the wider Finito system kicked into action. I was introduced to a professional CV writer who helped me craft the most amazing CV, and I was invited to London to have my photo taken by a professional photographer to put on that CV, all as part of the bursary scheme.

As part of that visit I was invited to lunch with Christopher Jackson, News Director

at Finito, at the House of St Barnabas. The private members' club is invested in creating a fair and equal society, but I was still nervous as I arrived. I remember looking at the door and thinking it was like something from Harry Potter. The interior certainly was; there were so many rooms it was like a maze, all with separate personalities and themes. I met Christopher in a lounge room near the garden. My hands were sweating, knowing this was another massive opportunity to gain knowledge and experience. We chose to start with lunch but only after he showed me around some of the different rooms. I remember walking into a room that looked like a church hall, another that was warm with colours and paintings, and the corridors were narrow and brimming with art.

**“I will be forever grateful to The Stewarts Foundation, and in particular its Chairman John Cahill.”**

Everything was out of my norm - a peaceful professional environment that was not like anything I had experienced in my normal life in Derby. We arrived at the restaurant, a hall again adorned with art with polite guests and staff. Christopher asked me about my interests and where I see myself going with Finito. I was interested in his story too, and I learned about his experiences and work. After lunch Christopher walked me through the bustling streets of Central London back to the station. The weather was perfect, and as we walked and discussed more deeply each other's stories, Christopher was drafting ideas

in his head for experience placements for me. That day was more than just a trip to take photos. I was generously given the chance to see London, learn so many new things and create contacts with two lovely people at no personal expense - something that would never be possible without Finito.

It was from that meeting that Christopher approached a contact within his network, Daniel Whomes, the Chairman of the Oyster Partnership, who organised an interview for me to join the company for some work experience in the Summer. Recruitment wasn't a career that I knew anything about, but it was the experience and wider knowledge of the Finito mentors that married my salesmanship, entrepreneurial desires and my hard work ethic to the idea of becoming a recruitment consultant. Having just had the interview I'm delighted to report that I will be spending time with that company soon. The opportunities that I know this work experience will bring would not have been available to me without the help of the Finito Bursary scheme, and I will be forever grateful to The Stewarts Foundation, and in particular its Chairman John Cahill, for their financial contribution towards my work journey. I'm excited for what the future holds for me and will always know, wherever life takes me, that I received a life-changing opportunity just when I most needed it. **f**



John Cahill



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# Human, All too Human: The Finito World guide to the HR sector

BY PATRICK CROWDER

Apple Headquarters ([www.arne-mueseler.com](http://www.arne-mueseler.com), [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org))



**T**he mere mention of human resources can conjure up all sorts of preconceptions and emotions. Often human resource officers are seen as the cops of the workplace – dictating what employees do and say and sacking them at the first sign of unproductivity. “I think it’s certainly true that it’s become much harder to express yourself freely over the past 10 to 15 years and that’s true at universities and it’s also true in the workplace,” the contrarian thinker Toby Young tells us.

Human resources is also a complex topic, and these more basic misconceptions can be damaging, both to the HR industry and to employees

who may be less likely to seek out help from their HR departments when they need it. At its core, HR is about managing people, resolving conflicts, finding solutions, and optimising businesses to improve efficiency. Not all HR departments are perfect, there is no doubt about that, but complex issues require careful analysis.

That’s why Finito World has spoken to HR professionals across the industry, learned about the rise of new recruiting practices, and profiled 50 HR professionals from top companies to find out the true value of HR and to see how it can be done better.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) is the main

professional body for HR professionals in the UK. First founded as the Welfare Workers’ Association in 1913, the CIPD now provides resources, support, accreditation, and data about the people profession. Their data shows that Human Resources makes up 1.6 per cent of the UK workforce – that’s around 472,000 individuals working in the industry. HR in the UK has grown 17 per cent overall between 2009 and 2019, and HR Manager and Director roles have increased by 57 per cent.

There is a perception that the HR industry is paid extremely highly, and while there are certainly a good number of high-paying roles, pay across the industry is quite variable. According



to the CIPD, median pay for an HR employee can range from £18,372 to £115,953 per year. Naturally, this will vary based on role. HR Directors have the highest median pay of £91,301 per year, while less senior roles such as HR Assistant will see around £24,712 per year. As with most professions, with seniority comes higher pay, and the opportunity for advancement within HR is one of the major forces which drives interest in the industry.

A major part of HR is people analytics, which is the practice of using data about a company's employees to find business solutions. This is where the idea of the HR department spying on employees comes from, and yes, if not conducted ethically, personal data can be used in ways which violate trust, privacy, and even the law. The CIPD recommends transparency, ensuring that the data system does not discriminate against any group, and ensuring that only necessary data is collected and analysed. This is a contentious area because of the ways that it can be misused. Automating a process which directly affects people's livelihoods is never ethical, so hiring and firing decisions should never be made until a human has examined the data in question. This isn't always the case, so the use of employee surveillance has gained a bad reputation. When used correctly, people analytics can be used to help employees, tackle pay gaps, improve training, and find the best ways to improve employee wellbeing.

Middle management was created out of necessity during the Industrial Revolution, when the scale of businesses increased to a point that business owners could no longer oversee all operations of their companies. Since its creation, middle management has been the subject of controversy. Think back to the character of the "straw boss" in early 20th century labour action. In



British author Douglas Murray in 2019. (Photo by Andy Ngo)

Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, straw-bosses are portrayed as company stooges, existing solely to ensure that labourers worked hard for little pay, while not doing much if any work themselves. While this is an extreme example of middle management, these perceptions can still be seen in views of Human Resources departments today.

Recently, Douglas Murray published an opinion piece in the *Telegraph* entitled *Young people aspiring to be HR managers are a dire sign of a country in trouble*. In it, he argues that HR is unimportant, that youth should not "aspire to be bureaucratic middle-meddlers" and criticises HR's

place as one of the highest paid roles in the country. Murray questions the necessity of HR, stating that "The principal qualifications for this overpaid role in my experience are stupidity, lack of curiosity, misguided self-worth and odious self-importance." If this is true, then many young people must be dead-set on making careers of needless bureaucracy, because the HR industry is growing fast.

With all of the different ideas circulating about HR, it is essential to understand what the role of HR is, why someone would want such a role, and how the practice is changing with the introduction of new technologies. **f**

## An Interview with: Professor of International Human Resources Management Chris Brewster of Henley Business School

**F**irst, we spoke to Professor Chris Brewster who teaches International Human Resource Management at Henley Business School. He believes that there are no universal truths in HRM, and that one size fits all solutions are often detrimental in the industry. He specialises in the changing world of work and teaches his students to be versatile. We asked him what he thinks about the leading theories in HRM, and what the key is to managing people successfully.

"I have a friend who says that every new idea that's ever come up about human resources management he can already find on his bookshelves if he looks at Plato or Aristotle or St. Augustine or Machiavelli. Lots of these guys have said a lot of things much better. And there's a reason for that, which is that basically people haven't changed over the last several thousand years," Brewster says. "And it seems to me that basically, if you treat people properly in the way that you think they would like to be treated, you'll get a better result than if you treat them just as digits or artefacts."

A variety of factors can affect the strategy which must be taken when managing people – this can have to do with the country you're working in, the size of the company, and which sector you're in. Brewster explains the hierarchy of these differences.

"The most important thing is country.

No matter which country you're in, you have to follow the laws and the expectations of that country, and they vary pretty considerably. The second thing is size. Because obviously, if you're running a small mom and pop corner shop with three people, you don't manage it in the same way as if you've got 3000 people, that would be pretty crazy. So size actually makes a big difference. And that's very important because most of what we know from the academics and from the consultancies and so on comes from large, well-funded companies with HR departments and things like that," Brewster says.

So what's the outlook for those who study HR at university or at a business school? "Most people who are doing HR courses are probably going to end up in fairly small to medium-sized businesses, so they're not going to be able to do what they've been told the big companies are doing."

Are there any other distinctions? "Thirdly, of course, there is a difference between managing people in the public sector or the private sector. There's a difference between managing people in, let's say, an office cleaning business and managing people in a laboratory. For example, there's a big thing at the moment about big data and using fantastic algorithms to show where your most and least productive people are. If you're running a small cafe somewhere, that really is not going to be a help



Professor Chris Brewster of International Human Resources Management

to you, is it? So it's a case, I think, of getting some kind of perspective on these things."

Many people are under the impression that human resource managers have a lot of power within a company to make changes and to optimise productivity, but Brewster says that the idea of human resource managers as all powerful is a misconception. Oftentimes, decisions about how to manage people will come down to line managers or other officers, so it is important for human resource managers to not overestimate their power and promise undeliverable items.

"I've got some good stories where firms got taken over and the HR director was given a series of promises, and in good faith made these promises to the workforce, and then those promises were just blown out of the



water after the merger took place. So I think you've got to understand the power situation that you're in. Human Resource Management departments can be influential departments, but they're never really going to be powerful departments," Brewster explains. "The powerful departments are going to be the ones that control the money. There's a task there for us to think about - how do we influence people? How do we understand what our influence and our power position is? How do we influence people to get a bit more power? There's a lot of sort of loose talk by consultants about making the HR department more powerful and more strategic and so on."

Oftentimes, human resources officers are seen as unnecessarily bureaucratic, existing only to protect a company from liability and weed out the unproductive. The views that Murray expressed in his Telegraph piece are an example of an opinion which has floated around about HR for decades. We put this opinion to Brewster, who was keen to point out the difference between human resources and human resource management, and also to highlight the fact that just because a job is sometimes unpleasant does not mean that it is unnecessary.

"Human resource management is used in two ways, and we have a problem because people don't distinguish those two ways. I would argue that all organisations manage their people: you have to do that. It's one of the things like managing your markets, your money, and your equipment, that all businesses have to do. But that's not necessarily the same as the human resource management department. And I think a lot of people fairly casually talk about human resource management, when what they're actually talking about is what the HR

department does, rather than how the business manages its people," Brewster argues. "And I think that's one of the concerns - we have to be clear about what the HR department does. And at that level, yes, at universities for example HR departments are very concerned with making sure you've filled in the forms. I'm going to New York for a conference in May and I've got to fill in all sorts of forms about insurance and about health and safety. And only then can I actually book the flight - and I can't book the flight myself, I have to book it through the HR department's system. All of this is designed, of course, to make sure nothing bad happens to me. But it does look a lot like cop work, stopping me doing what I want to do until I've filled in all the forms. It's a necessary task, but it's not an exciting one, you know?"

Despite the view of HR as bureaucratic and dry, there are many people who want to be human resource managers and are genuinely excited about human resources. We asked Brewster why he has a passion for HR. The industry is much more than filling in forms and ticking boxes - and as he explains, even the duller side of the profession is essential to the function of a business.

"Lots and lots of people aspire to be human resource managers, and I think partly that's because for a lot of individuals dealing with people is a more attractive option than dealing with numbers or dealing with bits of machinery or whatever. It's a question of weighing these things up. There are parts of the human resource management function which are genuinely gratifying. I mean, I've been involved in things like training and so on myself, when you can actually see people grow in front of you, and that's

really good to do. But there's a lot of other stuff that has to be done as well. I guess that's the same for pretty much every job, and it's about being careful not to oversell one thing at the expense of the other. There are good things and bad things about almost every job," Brewster says. "These people who say, oh, let's get rid of the HR department, it's just a drag - you go 'well, so who's going to do those things?' I mean, you can't just let people do whatever they want. Firms can't afford to keep breaking the law, for example, or to keep upsetting trade unions,. Somebody needs to look after that kind of stuff. If there are huge problems at work between individuals, it really helps to have somebody neutral who can actually look at that and deal with the problem."

Above all, Brewster teaches students how to be adaptable, which is an essential trait in HR considering the wide range of differences in the profession we've already discussed. We asked him what his number one piece of advice would be for someone looking to break into the world of HR, and more generally, how to succeed in an ever-changing world.

"Look on everything as a learning opportunity," Brewster says, "Try and learn as much about the business as you can. Try and learn as much about everybody as you can. Try and learn from your colleagues and your friends. There's lots and lots of learning opportunities in every job, and the more we think of each job, not so much as an end result, or something we've got to plough through, but as a learning opportunity, the better. You'll get better results both now and in the future." f

## An HR success story: Uber's Amee Parekh

**Now that we have some background on the people professions, and the hot debates surrounding them, let's take a look at an HR success story.**

Amee Parekh has had an extremely successful career since she graduated from the University of Mumbai in 2005. She worked at IBM in software engineering roles for three years before attending Cornell, making the switch to HR, and going on to work for Expedia. She is now Head of HR for Uber Freight and Finance. We talked with her to find out her views on the best ways to succeed within the industry, the value of quality HR, and gender equality in the workplace.

"I grew up in India where I did my engineering work, and in India HR is actually an immensely hot function. It's almost like how software engineering is in the US or how tech is in other countries," Parekh says, "HR is very precious because a lot of companies over there are very high growth, so they really need HR to supercharge their hiring, train people in new skills, and manage a staff of thousands."

Parekh was aware of how many opportunities in HR were out there, but she truly became interested in the field while working as a software engineer.

"On one of my first projects I happened to be working with the HR team building an internal portal, and through that I got a close-up look at the amazing job they were doing with hiring and how they were truly driving an impact on the business. That's what motivated me to seriously consider this as a career."



Parekh then applied to a wide range of Master's programmes in the US at top universities, and got accepted to every single one. She chose Cornell University because of their top-ranked HR programme. Much has been written about the best ways to get into top schools - unique experiences, volunteering, sports, etc. - but Parekh took the traditional but difficult approach of pure academic excellence.

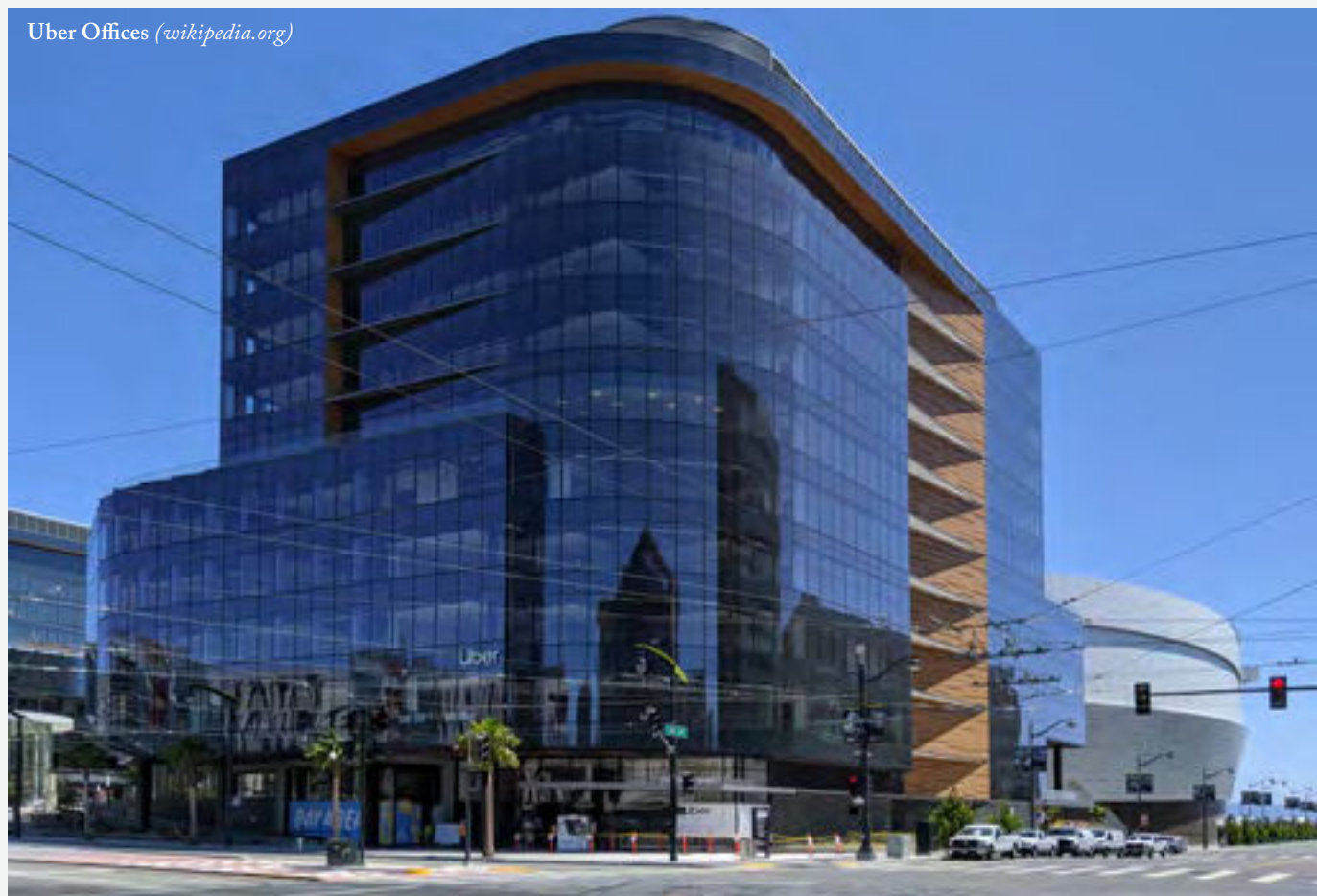
"I know universities want all of these extracurricular activities, but I think universities in the US also value academics a lot, so my undergrad was very useful," she recalls, "My scores were very strong all throughout school. I was very much a geeky or nerdy student growing up, and even in high school I was taking advanced physics and maths."

But what about outside of education? After graduating from Cornell, she says that finding employment opportunities was not difficult. For many, the guiding hand from study to work may take the form of a mentor who can advise on career opportunities and help people find their way into the corporate world. For Parekh, her career boost came more from the bosses she worked with than from any other source of advice.

"I have been able to grow and succeed in my career because I have had two or three managers who have truly believed in me," Parekh says, "One manager at Expedia helped me by doing two major things; pushing me into difficult challenges and providing amazing feedback." She adds, "The kind of feedback I received from him was



Uber Offices ([wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uber))



transformational for me, and I think that can only come from a boss who is much closer to your work than an outside mentor.”

Parekh has succeeded through a lot of hard work and intense study and breaking into the world of top-level HR can often take years. We asked her what traits she thinks are essential in a good HR officer.

“Business acumen is a crucial trait, because there are thousands of HR initiatives and you can be aware of the framework of it, but what makes one HR professional far better than others is an understanding of the business where they can advise the CEO, ‘because of where the business is, we should do X, Y, and Z’. If you can do that as an HR professional, that’s where the magic comes,” Parekh says, “Having a good sense of quantitative abilities is also very useful, because business is all numbers. Even if an HR professional doesn’t come

from a data background, I think that is an area which is worth investing in and learning about.”

Gender and racial inequality in the workplace has come a long way in recent years, but it is by no means perfect. Parekh has three children and a top-level position, which shatters what she describes as the typical perception.

“My experience has been very positive, but I cannot say that reflects every woman’s experience. I think it’s come through a lot of hard work – people are aware that I outwork everybody else,” Parekh says, “But if I tell people without any context that I have three kids, there’s an assumption that I won’t be able to put as much time in as other employees. There is an expectation there, and that’s why you have to break it every time.”

In a parting message to the industry, Parekh says, “Try it out. Hire a few female leaders and see how things go. Conversation isn’t enough, you have to

actually put women in these roles, then you can see the advantages.”

From Parekh’s story, it is clearly possible to have a lucrative, fulfilling career in human resources. So why then do so many people disregard the profession as unnecessary or dull? As Chris Brewster pointed out, much of the work in HR is not very glamorous – and nobody requiring mind-numbing paperwork to be filled out is going to look like the ‘good guy’. However, Dr. Liz Houldsworth, who heads the Masters programme in International Human Resource Management at Henley Business School, argues that portrayals of HR in popular media are to blame for what she believes is a false perception. Each year, she holds a discussion entitled “Why work in HR?” with her students, breaking down popularised notions of HR and making it known that the job can be a lot more than paperwork. [f](#) [t](#) [o](#) [w](#) [o](#) [r](#) [l](#) [d](#)

Opinion?

# Why HR management deserves to be seen as a desirable profession

DR. LIZ HOULDSWORTH

**I**n the opening episode of the new drama *Slow Horses*, a wrongly disgraced Mi5 officer takes some comfort when he visits his nemesis and, on finding him in a room full of filing cabinets, realises that he is no longer a practicing spy and has been ‘relegated to Human Resources’.

Such depictions in film, TV and written word are not uncommon. A well-known piece by Hammonds in 2005 heralded ‘Why we hate HR’; parodying the function for its technical jargon such as ‘internal action learning’ and arguing that it was not a role for the brightest and best, typically populated by those who were not the ‘sharpest tacks’. More recently Douglas Murray in the *Telegraph* was indignant at discovering the role of HR manager to be one of the most desirable and highest paid.

Having worked and researched in Human Resource related fields for over 20 years I recognise this as a continuing, and key, debate. With the Masters students I teach at Henley Business School, I make the point that for most organisations people are both the largest single element of operating (variable) costs and the single resource that can generate value from the organisation’s other resources. Managing any organisation cost-effectively therefore requires knowledgeable, careful and skilful human resource management.

Put simply, for the majority of businesses it really is all about the people. The news that HR managers

might now be one of the better paid jobs perhaps suggests that organisations are finally putting cash behind the hyperbole that ‘People are our most important asset.’

“People are our most important asset.”

For the specialists we teach, who choose to go into HRM as a profession, it is important for them to understand the kind of ignorant assumptions that they may face, but it is also important to understand the motivation of these bright and enthusiastic individuals who have chosen to invest their time and money to qualify to work in the HR profession.

A common misbelief is that HRM is for individuals who like working with people. As many other commentators have pointed out, HRM is not about being nice to people. A former colleague once said to me: ‘I used to think HRM was easy, all about people, but these ‘soft’ things are really hard.’ Done well, HRM is carried out by business-focused individuals who make difficult decisions and lead effective change programmes in ways which don’t attract negative media attention. To take one recent example, a US mortgage company recently sacked 900 staff by Zoom, attracting massive negative publicity and harming the business.

One of the reasons my students cite as a driver for selecting a career in HRM



Dr. Liz Houldsworth

is that they want to make a difference to people’s working lives. This impact might be through the shaping and maintenance of the organisation’s culture, or by responding in a timely fashion to fast-changing needs. Such a fleet-of-foot response is not synonymous with the self-important bureaucrats seen through Murray’s distorting lens. Had HRM generally been populated by such individuals we might still be waiting for the health and well-being programmes that supported so many millions during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent implementation of hybrid working.

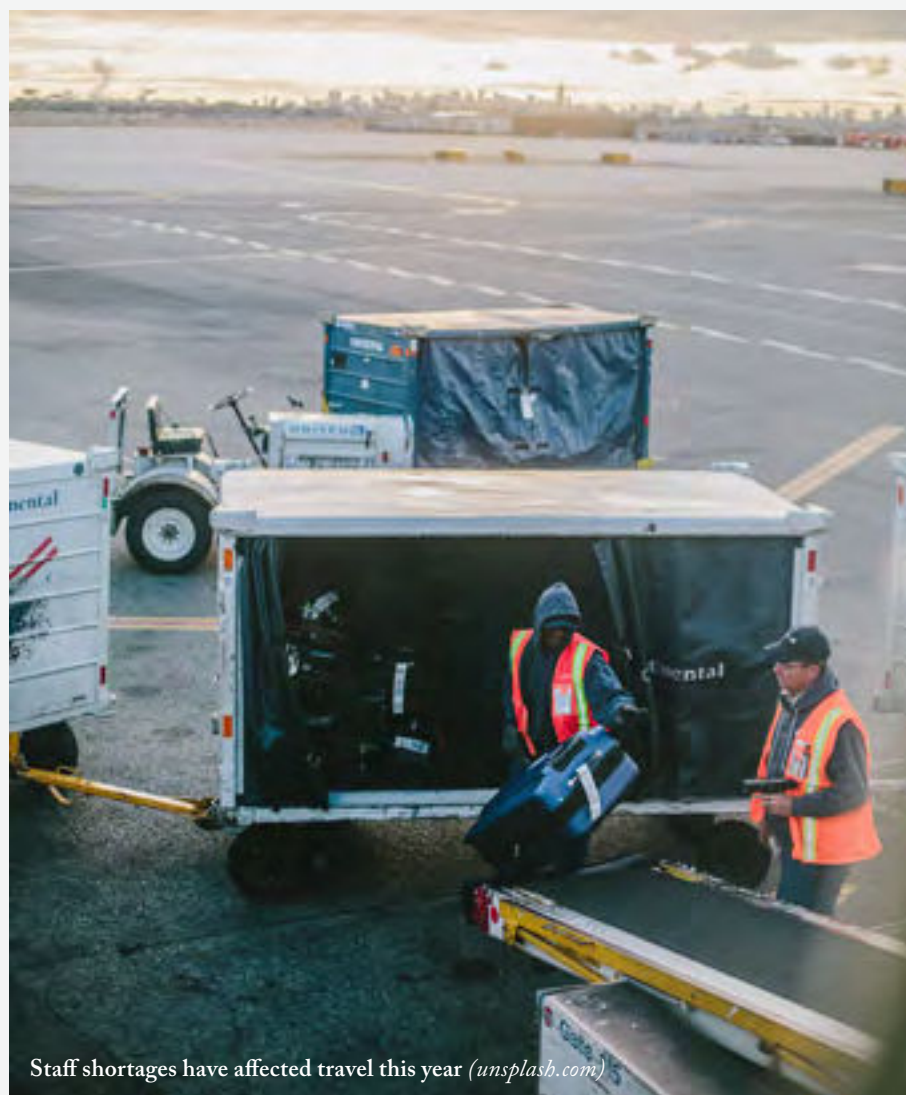
Of course, as with all the other functions of any effective business, production, finance, IT or marketing, HRM has a normal range of individuals from those who are naturally brilliant at it and are heavily relied upon members of the top management team, to those who are incompetent drudges.



But for the most part serious organisations, and commentators, recognise HRM as more strategic and deserving of its seat at the table. In the more sophisticated organisations, there is a clear understanding of the transition of HRM away from being a largely administrative function to becoming a more strategic function. Of course, there is still a bureaucracy around hiring, payroll, pensions administration, etc. It is important that these things are handled competently and consistently (if you are not sure about that, think what would happen if people didn't get paid the right salary at the right time).

But there is much more to the role. To take a crucial example, recruitment is one of the core skill areas within HRM. Get the right people in and many other management problems become much easier to resolve; get the wrong ones and the organisation is building up near and long-term future problems for itself. In organisations of any significant size, recruitment is a holistic resourcing strategy and HRM specialists are expected to manage the flow of resources (people) into, through and eventually out of the organisation.

Human resource planning may be an area which has less of a trendy image than other areas of management – and will be unknown to many casual commentators on HRM. It requires detailed data collection, analysis of changing external circumstances (most recently Covid, of course), understanding the likely availability of internal and external labour markets (think Brexit) and the organisation's likely future demand for labour. Without effective thinking – consider the travel industry at present – businesses will swerve within weeks from being expensively over-staffed, to being desperately short of appropriately trained employees. Anyone thinking



Staff shortages have affected travel this year (unsplash.com)

this is a low-value activity should try telling that to the people struggling to get away for their Easter break because of a lack of baggage handlers, or to farmers unable to get their produce picked or hoteliers without chefs or waiting staff.

Depicting the individuals who specialise in order to do this work as presumptuous dullards is perhaps what got us into these situations in the first place. A country should indeed encourage young people to excel and be great at things that are important, and roles in human resource management are high on that list.

As Dr. Houldsworth mentions, recruitment is a huge part of HR. Businesses are always reliant on people, and who a business hires can make the difference between a successful company and a failed venture. Hiring practices are

changing with technology. AI can be used to scrape through a pile of resumes, searching for keywords at the most basic level, to determine if a candidate is qualified. Additionally, social media is becoming increasingly important in hiring. Platforms such as LinkedIn are the most obvious example of this, but social recruitment is now occurring on many platforms, from Twitter to Instagram. Amanda Brown is a mentor at Finito who specialises in crafting LinkedIn profiles which showcase a student's education, experience, skills, qualities and aspirations in a concise manner. She has also seen the rise of social recruitment and the effects that it will have on the hiring process. Brown breaks down the new practice, and offers advice for those trying to navigate this new recruitment landscape. f

# #Hiring - The Rise of Social Recruitment

AMANDA BROWN

**The term 'social recruitment' has gradually seeped into business language as recruitment and HR departments take advantage of social media platforms and online forums for sharing career opportunities. According to research from Cybercrew, the average amount of time spent on social media is 102 minutes a day. Sharing job opportunities on platforms where potential candidates are already active makes good business sense.**

Recruiting via social media helps reach a younger audience who expect a strong online presence from companies. In addition, a company may attract passive candidates who are not actively seeking new opportunities and also sharing career-related posts helps to improve the reputation a company has as an employer – their employer brand.

In a hard-pressed labour market, with shortages across many sectors, from professional services through to hospitality, employers are keen to use every avenue possible to attract high quality candidates, and social media adds to the mix.

## Organic social recruitment

The term 'organic' social media refers to the posting of updates to company pages and personal profiles free of charge. Simply post a description of the vacancy, accompanied by an image or video, and a link to the careers page on the website. LinkedIn and Twitter are the platforms of choice for B2B

organisations, whereas Facebook pages and groups are invaluable for local jobs, and for the B2C market, Instagram may be the social media site of choice.

These job-related posts can be amplified using social media advocacy whereby current employees reshare them with their own personal, online networks. According to LinkedIn, the network of a company's workforce is 10 times that of the LinkedIn company page, and some employees may have several thousand connections.

If the manager of the company's LinkedIn page uses the 'Notify employees' function, employees are notified of the post the HR or recruitment department wants to share. Regular communications between the marketing department and those responsible for recruitment will ensure the jobs posts are timely.

Having a current employee record a short video about their experience of working in a company is a very powerful draw for applicants and a cleverly scripted video can be reused in multiple situations. The video taken on a smartphone or, if budget allows, one that is professionally produced.

## #Hiring

For active LinkedIn users involved in the recruitment process, adding the #Hiring outer ring to their profile picture is a simple way to indicate that there are career openings.

Adding hashtags to posts is also



Amanda Brown

advisable as candidates frequently use them as search terms when looking for job opportunities. It is therefore worthwhile spending time researching which ones are most popular in specific industry sectors and for different roles.

## Paid social recruitment

In addition to sharing posts in the usual way, launching an advertising campaign, where adverts are listed in the news feeds of social media users, is another alternative. Using the targeting and filters available on the social media advertising platforms means that adverts are only shown to highly relevant audiences. 'Stopping the scroll' by using eye-catching images or video helps the advert to shine out on the screen.

Another 'paid-for' route is LinkedIn's jobs' listing function which allows candidates to search for and apply directly on the platform.

In conclusion, whether the organic or paid route is chosen, having up-to-date, enticing company profiles on all social media platforms is an essential part of being a successful social recruiter. Regular posting of content which



demonstrates the company values their employees will help attract high-quality candidates, reduce the cost of recruitment and speed up the hiring process.

*From the outside looking in, the structure of companies can seem bewildering. In this article, the Head of Public Affairs at BDB Pitman, Stuart Thomson explains the ways in which the Public Policy department works with HR and business development across a typical organisation.*

All organisations come with their own jargon, language, and structures. Understanding all that can be a full-time role. Public affairs can play a critical role, but it may not be talked about or can be a small part of a larger practice area. So, what it is all about and why should you take it seriously?

The work a public affairs team focuses on involves influencing public policy outcomes. That means fundamentally knowing their way around policy making including politics, politicians, and Parliament. They are the people who know how government works.

The foundation of any good public affairs operation should be to use the information, insight and intelligence gathered to play an active role in an organisation's operations.

An effective public affairs team, for instance, uses their political knowledge and understanding to inform an organisation's assessment and management of risk. Politicians and government can bring attention to an issue but, crucially, also have the power to inflict operational damage.

But it is not all down beat, good political insight can bring potential market and commercial opportunities with government as well.

The public affairs operation may stand alone or can sit within a wider communications department which

may itself be called external affairs. It can be part of a marketing function. For other organisations, it reports into the head of legal. There is no right or wrong organisational structure as long as its voice can be heard. It should all be about the constructive role it plays and how best it can engage and feed into the work of other parts of the organisation.

In particular, that means having a role in the wider reputation management of an organisation. Having a strong reputation is critical with a range of audiences, not least political ones. Developing a strong reputation takes time, effort and resources and the public affairs team should have a critical role. Not least, it needs an organisation to consider all aspects of its delivery against the standards expected of itself. That can mean difficult and challenging conversations but unless any gap between 'saying and 'doing' is removed then there is a potential for reputational damage.

Any public affairs role is also well positioned to help grow a reputation through, for instance, thought leadership which can be tied into political and policy development. There are obvious ways in which a public affairs team can work closely with different parts of an organisation.

Let's take the HR function, for instance. Public affairs may have a role in the internal communications of an organisation so there is a direct relationship with HR. Public affairs will be very aware of the need for employees to act, sometimes vocally, as champions for an organisation. They are your best advocates. Employee relations and governance are also critical elements of an organisation's reputation.

Government and politicians always want to know how well run any organisation is, but employee relations are often an area where a 'say-do' gap can emerge, and rhetoric and reality diverge.

So, whilst HR and public affairs fulfil different roles they often need to work together. This can also happen if something goes wrong. If someone on the management team were to misbehave then HR obviously needs to lead but the communications and reputation management are critical as well.

So, what about the skills needed to be part of a good public affairs team? Firstly, it is about being a policy navigator and understanding how policy is made and what the processes are, as well as the audiences.

Secondly, you need to be a strategy developer - that is, able to develop a public affairs strategy, pulling in the information and knowledge needed to do so. Thirdly, it helps to be a communications expert. That will include, everything from message development through to being able to work with the channels needed to get out to audiences.

Other things are important too. You need to be an audience engager, and have the ability to know and understand stakeholder audiences so that you can identify what drives them, how to communicate with them and how to work with them over a potentially prolonged period. It's also key to be a risk analyser, and possess the ability to consider a raft of information, as well as knowing and understanding politics, to identify potential risks. But also, how they should be addressed as well.

That's not all. You also need to be a networker - both inside and outside of the confines of work. It also helps to be a partnership developer, with the ability to work with a range of audiences, outside of politics as well, to build appropriate coalitions of interest.

So look out for the public affairs in your organisation, you may wish to work with them. They can be hugely useful. [f](#)

# The Crucial Role Of Public Affairs

DR. STUART THOMSON

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- **Policy navigator** - understanding how policy is made and what the processes are, as well as the audiences.

- **Strategy developer** - being able to develop a public affairs strategy, pulling in the information and knowledge needed to do so.

- **Communications expert** - everything from message development through to being able to work with the channels needed to get out to audiences.

- **Audience engager** - the ability to know and understand stakeholder audiences so that you can identify what drives them, how to communicate with them and how to work with them over a potentially prolonged period.

- **Risk analyser** - with the ability to consider a raft of information, as well as knowing and understanding politics, to identify potential risks. But also, how they should be addressed as well.

- **Networker** - both inside and outside of the confines of work.

- **Partnership developer** - with the ability to work with a range of audiences, outside of politics as well, to build appropriate coalitions of interest.

Look out for the public affairs in your organisation, you may wish to work with them. They can be hugely useful. [f](#)



# Paracelsus Recovery founder Jan Gerber: “A lot of therapy can happen making coffee in the afternoon”

**O**ur collective commitment to the question of mental health might be one of the main legacies of the pandemic. Though we have now largely returned to work, the scars of Covid-19 remain, and we remain aware of our psychological fragility. This is an issue which isn't going anywhere – and that's good news for those clinics who are there to serve high net worth individuals in this space.

Paracelsus Recovery was founded by Jan Gerber's family back in 2012. “My Dad's a psychiatrist, and my Mum's a clinical nurse specialist,” he tells me, “so we have this boutique niche rehab clinic which focuses on the world's UHNW population, and people in public life.” The business was founded with an important insight: “We realised there was a special need for that demographic. It wasn't being met on the confidentiality side or on the psychological side.”

A successful person will, of course, have a unique set of experiences – and these may amount to a specific set of struggles which need to be tackled with the very best methods. Gerber explains: “We realised that mental health is not just a question of psychotherapy or psychiatry: it's actually much more complex than that. Treating one client at a time with the price tag we have, means that there's budget to look at an individual from a 365 degree perspective.” So what does that entail? “We look at hormone levels, gut health, biochemical markers and so

on, on top of psychological assessments and so forth. We found a lot more underlying reasons which could fuel someone's mental health or addictive behaviour: these are rarely addressed due to budget constraints.”

So how did the pandemic affect Gerber's client base? “A typical CEO is an outgoing person, but sometimes with certain traits such as ADHD or bipolar which may not meet all the diagnostic criteria, but will make them very successful in the first place. But it usually also means they need direct interaction with the people around them.” Prior to Covid-19, the big meetings would still happen in person (“That's why big corporations have private jets”) but when things changed so dramatically, it often made these high fliers struggle.

Of course, there's also a generational aspect to the client base. “It's common knowledge that mental health struggles – if not addressed adequately – spill down to the next generation,” he explains. “There's probably a genetic component to that which is still being researched but there's definitely a component which relates to how kids are raised.”

Of course these sorts of problems can still happen even when wealthy parents have the best of intentions. “Nannies, and boarding schools and so forth – all that can create massive problems in a child's self-esteem,” Gerber continues. “We see it also with entertainers who are so busy with their roles that they can hardly devote time to their children.



We talk about neglect at one end of the socioeconomic spectrum, but there's neglect here too: we can call it affluent neglect.”

In Switzerland the clinic can look after children from 14 and up; in the company's London branch, patients begin at 18. But no matter who the clinic is treating, it always tries to bring in the whole family unit to the treatment process. “Normally after a few weeks of focusing on the person and stabilising them would be the right time to bring in family members. It's essential that the client's journey isn't out of sync with the rest of the family. They need to understand the journey, and their own role.”

What really sets Paracelsus apart is its 15:1 ratio, meaning that patients have a degree of attention which will be the envy of those who know that their problems require a deeper level of treatment than is typically possible



either at the NHS-funded level or even when it comes to the sort of paid care the middle class can afford.

“There is usually a massive cost constraint on mental health disorders,” explains Gerber. “Our patients see a psychiatrist every day for a couple of hours. We have a live-in therapist – an addictions counsellor – who stays with the client in the same residence, so they're there for 24 hours. A lot of therapy can happen making coffee in the afternoon, or standing at the kitchen table, or going out for a walk.”

Nutritional scientists are there to monitor gut health; bio-scientists put meal plans into place for the client. Yoga teachers, personal trainers, and massage therapists come in. Dedicated housekeepers, chefs, and drivers complete the picture. All of this is orchestrated by clinical coordinators: “It's like Swiss clockwork,” Gerber says. “In rehab that doesn't have that kind of close attention, often problems go by unnoticed – sometimes for many days, and sometimes forever.”

It's an international clinic and so I take the opportunity to ask him if he sees any national trends in the world's mental health. Gerber replies: “One difference keeps cropping up: people

from the Middle East struggle more with structure than people from the West. In the west, we tend to have meals at more or less specific hours and that puts people in the Middle East at a disadvantage when it comes to mental health recovery, as structure is very important. In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, there's no such thing as a schedule. You can say you have a meeting at 11am and someone mightn't show up and that's absolutely fine and part of life. It's not for us to judge if that's good or bad but it's definitely not supportive for mental health struggles.”

I ask if the UK's predilection for alcohol comes up in clinical practice: “Absolutely. The biggest issue I see with alcohol is this: because it's legal and part of our social interactions, it's considered less harmful than it actually is. I'm not saying it should be outlawed but it can be more disruptive and destructive than many illicit drugs are. When the slippery slope starts it's really hard to identify. If you see your friends snorting cocaine, you might think there's an issue there, but maybe not with alcohol – even though it might actually be more harmful.”

Gerber also points out that some addictions, like food or sex addiction,

can be difficult to kick because they are part of our lives. “Sugar is quite an addictive substance and it's a tough one to kick. Sex addiction is a tough for one as you can't cut it out forever – you need to learn to live with it healthily, and develop a healthy relationship with that activity.”

I ask Gerber where we are at the moment with mental health and whether there's anything more government can do on this front.

“Government has a big role and it's a very difficult job,” he says. “It's easy to pick on all the mistakes and lack of funding and so on, and how that's deployed because there's never enough, but government definitely has a role in regulating certain substances. Portugal has shown that legalisation is often the right way to go – but that doesn't mean addictive substances should be unregulated or untaxed.”

Gerber is clearly passionate about this issue. He continues: “There's a big role for government in awareness work and in regulating advertising. There's also a lot of prevention work to be done at schools and with parents. We also need to consider social media and online shopping and the way they're designed to make people hooked in ways which can be destructive to people's mental health. But government always lags behind because it's a bureaucratic process, and government has a lot of things on their plate.” <sup>f</sup>

*Christopher Jackson is News Director at Finito World*



## An interview with James Connor: Millwall F.C. footballer turned wealth manager

BY ROBERT GOLDING

**James Connor isn't exactly your traditional idea of a footballer – but then he's not necessarily what you'd expect from a wealth manager either. But great businesses always have a certain generosity about them – whether that be a generosity of spirit or energy or imagination. But in the case of Connor Broadley, one senses a central kindness which comes back, you suspect, to Connor himself.**

"I come from a working class family," he tells us. "Dad ran his own heating business and for most of his career was a one-person firm, with mum as his secretary. If the phone went when we were having dinner, it could be a new client and so you'd have to answer the phone."

The family business did well enough to send Connor to the Mall in Twickenham. As I get to know Connor I will note how he tends to see the best in situations and in people, and this is the case with his schooling: "I like to think I had the richest upbringing. I did have a really working class family: we used to congregate at my nan's house every day up until the age of 13, with uncles and aunts and cousins. But Zak Goldsmith was in my class at school, and there were a number of high-profile actresses and actors who had sent their children there. That gave me a sense of self-confidence."

As it turns out Connor would have plenty of reasons for self-confidence –

but I never get a sense while talking to him that he has a shred of arrogance. Early on, he realised he was good at sports, although initially there was scepticism from his teachers as to whether football – which in time, would be his chosen sport – would ever pay. "I remember being told: 'James, you're good at sports but it will never be a career for you'. This was the pre-professional era, and money hadn't come into football then."

In time, Connor would attend Hampton, a former grammar school, where his passion for football deepened. Initially, after unluckily breaking his arm on the night of Republic of Ireland v Romania during Italia 90, Connor thought he had lost the chance to pursue his dream. "But as luck would have it, my nan had moved to Aldershot – which was 92nd in the football league out of 92 clubs. She heard they were doing a last chance saloon trial day, offering seven apprenticeships at the end of it." Connor secured one, but decided after breaking his arm to do his A-Levels at the same time. When the club folded, Connor again thought a football career might not happen.

Good fortune struck again however, when his former Aldershot manager called the Connor family while James was interailing in Europe to say he'd moved to Millwall and he'd like him to join the trial. Connor was on the training pitch 48 hours later. "I saw the career that I could have," he recalls.



"Millwall had one of the best youth academies at the time, and it was well known for building the best youth players and selling them, and there were internationals in the youth team there. That was August. By November I had signed a five year contract, a PFA representative came to see me. Dad encouraged me to buy my first house at 18 which is where my interest in personal finance came from. Only Garth Crooks and Paul Gascoigne at that point in history had been offered a five-year contract."

Connor was a quiet player, and the only privately educated player on the team. Mick McCarthy was the manager at that time. "We were doing a drill – and Mick was a very strong person, and reminded everyone that I wouldn't be

shouting for the ball," Connor recalls. In this, he also draws a parallel with his current role in wealth management: "I'm much better operating one to one, since this job is about intimate conversations and relationships: it's not a job which involves talking to large numbers of people. I like to go about my business discretely and be respected for being good at what I do."

There were other skills which Connor developed at Millwall F.C. "One of the great things about football at all levels is that it attracts a real social mix. And you just love it and embrace it for what it is. Your team mates are all equals. Similarly, entrepreneurs come from all walks of life."

These skills meant that Connor was better prepared than he perhaps realised at the time, when his career ended through injury. You sense that this was a challenge even for someone with his innate optimism. "It was the defining point in my life," he says. "It left me so determined to make it at something else. Football is a brutal industry and there's no support network for people once you exit the game."

But again Connor would be fortunate. The then chairman of Millwall was Peter Mead – the Mead in the UK's then largest advertising agency Abbot Mead Vickers. He took Connor under his wing. "Difficult as it was not doing what I wanted to do at 21, being thrust into the creative advertising scene was an amazing education in itself," Connor recalls.

Gradually, Connor's career began to evolve. Everything kept coming back to an interest in personal finance, which had been planted in him by his father. "In my twenties, I found myself going to buy the Sunday newspaper to read the personal finance section. By the age of 27, I realised it would play to my

strengths. I took a 90 per cent pay cut then but I knew it would suit me and I was prepared to do it."

It would turn out to be a masterstroke, and again, Connor draws a comparison with football: "One thing you have to have in sport is a good instinct. I find it eyebrow-raising when I hear people making career moves when they have no natural segue into it."

At first Connor was, in his own words, "just a bag carrier". He loved the work and built an impeccable reputation, but when a fraud scandal occurred in the firm, Connor decided that he had to preserve his hard-won reputation. Though the scandal had had nothing to do with him, he started his own firm to avoid being tainted by it. "A number of people said: 'Don't be implicated in any way. Go and set up your own company and we'll come with you.'"

Again, Connor's experience in football was formative. "I'd noted as a footballer that when I was approached by financial professionals there was such a lack of integrity – and there is still is in some quarters. We wanted to be respected from day one. We didn't try and entice previous connections over; we waited for the phone to ring. Our first client fee was £250 and we felt like we'd won the lottery at that point."

This commitment to integrity sometimes meant giving advice which was in contradiction of their own personal interests. "Our first enquiry was from a longstanding accountancy connection. She'd lost her husband and there was a tabled investment proposal which she didn't think was in her interests. We were asked to take a look. We had to explain we were in our first few days of business. I took one look at the lady in question and realised she was in no fit state to make a decision as she'd been through a life-changing

event – and I know about life-changing events. We told her to stick the money into a bank account to take stock of her life and to talk to us when things had calmed down. She's now been a client for 15 years."

The approach has worked. Connor Broadley now has an AuM of £500 million – with an expected £100 million increase to come this year alone. But Connor insists it's not about the numbers: "Growth at Connor Broadley should come as a consequence of looking after clients, giving them advice and underpinning it with a personal service: it has to be the right kind of growth. Word is spreading and we continue to grow: we attract nice people – people that appreciate a longer term relationship genuinely." That word 'genuine' is overused but it certainly applies to Connor.

So how do you become a client? "The entry point is £1 million of eligible longer term money if we're going to commit to providing them with an ongoing service." The firm has a cautious approach. "The way we invest clients' money is geared to growing purchasing power of our clients' money by a specified amount above inflation after fees are taken into account across a number of different risk profiles. We don't purport to be a wealth manager that's offering double digit returns from one year to the next. We want to look after the wealth people are dependent on to live comfortable lives."

This is a firm set to grow in the next years, as it brings – starting at the top – some much-needed integrity into the difficult-to-navigate world of wealth management. [f](#)



# Edtech Interview: — Plum Innovations founder Ji Li — on the rise of remote learning

BY CHRISTOPHER JACKSON

**By the time I talk to Ji Li the pandemic has receded enough that I could probably meet with him face to face, but it's fitting that I don't. That's because our conversation is all about the way in which information technology has changed in schools over the last twenty years or so – and the remarkable ramifications that's had for education in this country.**

Li is the CEO and founder of Plum Innovations which specialises in the provision of education technology to schools, and so is well-placed to give an overview. “It’s a fascinating evolution,” Li says over Zoom. “It helps to look a bit deeper at the statistics to consider the scale of the change. According to the British Education Supplier Association Research, in 1998 there were 820,000 computers in schools in the UK. That amounts to about 31 computers per school.”

It’s worth briefly concentrating on that statistic, and thinking about what it meant. This was a world without that culture we’re familiar with: a laptop for every table – a computer as a kind of accessory of yourself. And of course that had ramifications for schools. “As a result of that,” Li explains, “most of the schools in the UK were serviced by local authority IT technicians.”

But then Li produces the latest statistics: “However, in 2019, before



the pandemic, there were over three million computers in schools. And you also have to remember that during the pandemic – because of the way that period went – that number has increased dramatically.”

Those statistics aren’t yet available but are likely to be equally eye-popping when they are released. So what are the ramifications of that seismic change for the IT industry? “The IT landscape has changed absolutely.

But what’s most notable is the way in

which schools have relatively limited budgets and so technicians have to provide a cost-effective way to manage large quantities of computers – and they have to do that still with very limited time. They might still only visit each school once or twice a week.”

It’s a radical but also exciting change – although, of course, it places stress on teachers, parents, students and the education technology industry alike. But Li also points out that it’s taken place alongside another development

which might be deemed to be as significant in its way. “This trend for remote-learning and remote-working has come along at a time when there has also been a dramatic expansion in the number of multi academy trusts,” he says. “Before these came along, most of the computers were located in one premises – and so the technician’s role would be to attend that site, and whatever problem needed solving would be done there, within that boundary.”

That might feel like a simple way of servicing schools, but of course it also places a certain strain on the technician involved. “Not only has the quantity of computers increased but the workload has too, and technicians have had to change their schedules in order to meet other requirements. On top of that,” Li continues, “another issue must be navigated: a good education technology company will also need to service the question of working from home and working at school – and that may even include servicing the parents as well. So I think all this has changed the way in which technicians work with schools, and how they can work more closely with providers. It comes down to a question of there being far more devices in circulation in schools – but a perennially limited budget.”

All that, of course, means that Li, who has a team of four, has to pay extra attention to looking after his staff, as well as making sure that all things run like clockwork in the schools which he services. “The workload my technicians have is something we have to think about – but also we deal with the fact that every day we’re confronting new challenges. That’s part of the joy of working in a changing industry. But it also means that I need to make sure I

concentrate on the well-being of my technicians – because that’s important to the schools as well.”

So how does Ji Li cope with all this? This is where it helps to be a small and nimble business, he says: “As Plum, we’re quite small and more flexible than a large company and can adapt to changing situations. When teachers work remotely, we also work remotely so we don’t have to visit all different physical locations.” It’s details like this which make you realise how Li’s success is partly due to an ability to be in lockstep with his schools. Li continues: “We’ve also been very diligent about setting up a proper infrastructure so that when we have more devices we can manage them in a centralised unified platform and that reduces workloads.”

The more time you spend with Li, the more you realise that what sets him apart is his passion for education – and his admiration for the teachers he works with. “We also work with teachers who are tech-savvy,” he explains. “And we work with teachers until they feel they’ve become used to the technology we’re all working with. That way everything goes smoother. It’s a challenge for them sometimes on the IT side – so our job is to reduce this stress wherever we can.”

And how do schools feel about this seismic shift? Li is admiring of the headteachers he works with and their ability to see the bigger picture. “A good leader in schools will know what’s happening in their schools – and the ones I speak to are simply happy that they have more devices to access. The most important thing we can do is create a trusted relationship with schools, and send a positive message about the potential for IT learning.”

And how are teachers handling the shift? Li is very positive about this. “In one of my schools in Kent, one of the teachers was pinged during the pandemic and told he had to work from home. But there weren’t enough supply teachers. Luckily, we had enough laptops for the class. So the teacher in question was able to be at home and do a Zoom call with his teaching assistant to plan the lesson. He was then able to do the whole class on Zoom, and the assistant was able to be present in the classroom. This was a huge reduction in stress for everyone – without that arrangement, the children would have missed the whole day.”

What is enjoyable in this story is the sense we get of how much each day matters in a child’s education. Another positive is that the pandemic has accelerated teachers’ familiarity with technology. “Throughout the past two years, teachers are up to speed now. During lockdown, teachers had to use these platforms,” Li explains.

Talking with Ji Li, I am struck by his passion for education, and his desire to drive things forward: “I’m lucky to work with schools who continue to utilise the equipment they became accustomed to throughout the pandemic. When they can, they want to teach in class, but they also understand the importance of digital skills especially from the top down. Headteachers know that for future generations digital skills are going to be vital.”

All this makes for considerable job satisfaction for Ji Li, and for those working with him. “It’s a great feeling,” he says. “Before the pandemic and during it, we’ve tried to see how we can be ahead of the curve and that’s what we’ve done.” They certainly have. [f](#)



# Interview with entrepreneur Joel Feldman

BY PATRICK CROWDER

**Joel Feldman founded his first business at 14. Now, at just 20 years old, he's the Director of Harker's Associates, which sells limited companies to solicitors, accountants, and entrepreneurs. We spoke to Feldman to find out how he was able to achieve success at such a young age, and what his plans are for the future.**

"Harkers wasn't fully founded until 2017, when I came on as a director. Previously, it was my father that had been forming limited companies to keep dormant as a hobby. In 2017 I finished school, and I had a job working at a place called Sykes House Farm, which was a butcher's," Feldman says, "Obviously, it wasn't a path that I wanted to follow career-wise, it was just something that I needed to do to earn a bit of money. Very intense hours, three in the morning until three in the afternoon, in a cold factory. So doing that, I quickly realised that the nine to five, or in my case three to three, isn't really what I want in life. I knew this from high school, but that really gave me the push forward. So I devised an idea that we should build this into a company, selling limited companies to entrepreneurs, accountants, and solicitors, as they would all benefit from having companies that are years old for credibility."

Working long hours at the butcher's gave Feldman time to envision a plan for Harker's Associates, and the motivation to leave his job to do something different. But Feldman's dreams of having his own business started long before he left school.

"When I was around 14 years old, I

started my first business in advertising. I was a Google Ad specialist, and I sort of learned web development skills and such from doing that. I did it for a year and a half I think, and it didn't quite work out for me. There's a quote that my father always says, 'everything comes back full circle'. I went to go work at the butcher's, I realised that's not what I want to do, then we came on to Harker's. I can say it comes back around full circle because I built the website through skills I'd learned through web development," Feldman says, "So after we built the website, I ran a Google ads campaign, and we did all sorts of advertising and such. Then in 2020, around the time of the pandemic, we started taking on clients, mostly accountants and solicitors, and it really took off. That's allowed us to expand a bit further, so now we reach a lot of entrepreneurs now that want to start a business."

At 14 years old, Feldman had already become a skilled web developer with an entrepreneurial spirit. While other students were dreaming of attending university, he had already grown tired of school – he wanted to go into business immediately. And for Feldman, business runs in the family.

"My father has always been an entrepreneur, so was my grandfather, and my mother as well – basically all my family. I went to school, but in my last couple of years I just wasn't interested any more. I didn't feel like it was the right path for me. There's that whole stigma of going from high school to college where you need to be in debt just

to end up having a job you don't really like doing, and none of that ever clicked for me," Feldman says, "I never enjoyed that sort of aspect of it, I always knew what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to start a business, and my main goal was always to end up in property, so starting Harker's and making a very large amount of money through that has allowed me to now go into property with buy-to-lets, developments and HMOs."

Now, Feldman is getting into the property world as he's always dreamed of. It seems as if he always has something going, be it Harker's, property, or even a recent venture into Italian marble importation. He shared some advice for young people about education, and about bouncing back from failure.

"The main reason I wanted to do this interview is to get out the point that you don't have to be living by this stigma in England where you have to go through the whole education system. If you want to be a doctor then of course it makes sense to do higher education, but if you're someone who wants to start an e-commerce business, or any other sort of venture where you don't need education, I don't think you should be in a position where you feel trapped by that system," Feldman says, "Like I say, we learn an awful lot through failure. I like to live by the expression 'a winner is only a loser who didn't give up'. Everyone's had failure in their life, but the people who give up often stay as failures, and the people who fail but keep going after it end up as winners." [f](#)

# Zack Fortag on leaving education early

**Zack Fortag never connected with the traditional education system. He left school at 16 to find his own way in life through entrepreneurial spirit. Now, at 21, he is both a business and charity owner. I spoke with him to find out how he's made it happen.**

"I basically grew up in an entrepreneurial type of family and also an education type of family where some were teachers and some were business people. At around 13-14 years old I started to really dislike school," Fortag says, "I was always very naughty at school, and I never really got on well with traditional education, so I basically decided to start two different businesses at school."

One of these businesses was the fairly classic game of selling candy to other students, but the other was much more innovative. The video game FIFA's online currency, which can be used to buy items in-game, would often fluctuate in price. Fortag saw this opportunity and began selling FIFA coins to other students much in the same way that a stock is traded – buy low, sell high. Fortag says that it wasn't until he began reading Alan Sugar that he began to branch out into different business ventures which eventually led to the creation of Ahead of Time Academy.

"I did that until about 15 then started reading Alan Sugar's book, and it basically told me about wholesale goods. I spent 500 pounds on a load of wholesale goods, things from your portable phone chargers, toilet roll, all sorts of different things. I'd wake up at four or 5am doing boot sales all day, and selling door to

door at all the big houses. We'd say 'this is for a school project' when obviously it wasn't, which I know is quite bad, but it was just a sales tactic," Fortag says, "Once I had sold that out, I wanted to help different groups of young people in the education system, so I created a clothing brand called Ahead of Time Academy. We helped over 100 young people get into fashion-based opportunities, and I was the youngest designer to work with ASOS and Pure London Fashion Show."

Ahead of Time was a way for young people to help develop and sell their business and fashion ideas. Through partnerships with clothing and accessory companies, people whose ideas were not getting seen could be elevated to the big leagues at a young age. It ran for about two and a half years before Fortag had his next big idea; Cozmos hospitality.

"When I was about 17 I wanted to move into the sport space, because I love sport, so I ran a hospitality company, which I still am involved in now. We work with agents all across the world providing sport and travel packages. Now we've got over 25 employees and over 500 agents working for us throughout the UK in America," Fortag says.

During Covid, Ahead of Time Academy led webinars teaching education materials not taught in school, such as entrepreneurship, mental health pathways, and employability. Now Fortag has started a new charity called the Inside Out Clothing Project, which is the UK's first clothing brand run by ex-offenders. Fortag explains how Alan Sugar led to the connections necessary to make it happen.



Zack Fortag

"While I was running Ahead of Time I got promoted by Alan Sugar, and through that I got interviews with Forbes, the BBC, and the Guardian. When I got interviewed by BBC, I met a reporter called Greg McKenzie. He was in care growing up, and we discussed ideas, and that's how we created Inside Out," Fortag says, "The idea was to get the most vulnerable groups of young people to launch their own businesses. It had never been done before in the UK."

Now that Inside Out's eight-week run has come to a close, I asked Fortag about his plans for the future. He answers with quiet, casual confidence.

"Next we're hopefully going to be moving into another business soon – we've just reached 500 agents worldwide working for us which is obviously a massive achievement, probably one of the biggest deals in UK hospitality this year. On the charity side, we'll just keep progressing. I've got some interesting projects coming up." [f](#)

*Interview by Patrick Crowder.*



# Letter from Bucharest: Jonathan Cathey on progress as the first casualty of war

**The first casualties of wars are often the young soldiers who have been sent to fight them. Next, the civilians who can't or refuse to leave the conflict zone and get caught up in the fighting, or who, in the case of Russia's utterly senseless assault on Ukraine, are deliberately and callously targeted with horrifying brutality. These tragic losses are vividly and heartbreakingly visible, and displayed in daily media for all to see, but as ordinary civilians swap work-clothes and laptops for fatigues and weapons, there is another casualty that rarely comes into view until long after the smoke and dust has cleared, the diplomacy done and armistice agreements are signed.**

In Ukraine, with the vast proportion of the remaining population focusing all of its efforts on repelling the invasion, this casualty is nothing other than all the things they were doing and all the progress they were making before they were invaded.

When the fighting eventually stops, there will be obvious and immediate priorities for the government of Ukraine: the resumption of vital supply chains to deliver food and potable water to the population; re-establishing essential services such as power and sanitation; supplying medical aid to those in desperate need; and shelter for those without it. The the most urgent objective will be the relief of immediate suffering and we can reasonably expect that many nations will help to deliver the aid and assistance that Ukraine will need.

Next comes an assessment of the damage, and the beginning of a lengthy journey of post-conflict repair and reconstruction, starting with vital infrastructure that has been purposely

and cynically targeted by Russian military commanders, such as hospitals, schools and emergency services. Then important cultural institutions such as government buildings, museums, libraries, and churches. At the same time, people's homes must be rebuilt, and so the list goes on. All this will take place throughout a period of unimaginable grieving.

If the Ukrainian people take on this enormous and daunting task with the same heroic determination that they have now become famous and admired for, and that has inspired the world during the past months, then we can be sure that this process will not stall, but it will still take time. To understand the level of destruction in parts of Ukraine that has been savagely meted out by Russia we could compare with Hamburg in WWII which was also badly damaged by extensive bombardment. Hamburg took more than 40 years to rebuild.

As a direct consequence of Vladimir Putin's vicious shelling of civilian infrastructure, rebuilding Ukraine will likely take decades. National treasures such as the Mariupol theatre which has been completely destroyed, and is likely the site of an unthinkable civilian massacre, are works of architecture that take many years to complete at the best of times. But it won't be the best of times, because there will be so many wounds to heal, and so many lost to mourn.

As I boarded a flight from Bucharest to Paris today, there were many Ukrainian passports in the queue. Special announcements were being made to inform them of arrangements to meet them at Charles de Gaulle airport, and I wondered how long it would be before they would be able to return to their homes, or if they ever would. I noticed that there were few adults amongst the

groups and many children: presumably many of their parents had stayed to fight. Then I wondered, what were they all doing before all this? What is it that won't happen anymore because of this?

It is astonishing to think that an advanced and civilised nation has now been reduced to the task of primary construction. Many important projects and initiatives will now stall and be delayed, perhaps indefinitely. For example, legislation was meant to take effect in 2022 legalising medical cannabis, which has proven life-saving for children suffering with rare forms of intractable epilepsy. In the worst cases this condition can be fatal, although this is rare, but that is exactly the point: the social agenda of Ukraine has progressed so far since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, that by 2022, tiny minorities of the Ukrainian population who would otherwise suffer can be helped. When the many are able and determined to look after the needs of the few, that is when a nation has reached the higher apex of progress and civilisation. We might also ponder that medical cannabis is still illegal in Russia.

So, the question is how long will it be before Ukraine can reach that point again? Russia's barbaric invasion has caused obvious damage and unforgivable casualties that are all too glaringly obvious to see, but the enduring damage of Putin's crimes will run deep for years, and probably decades to come. By the time the houses are rebuilt, cinemas are open and actors once more tread the boards of Mariupol theatre, children who were about to be saved in 2022 may no longer be here to see it. *f*

*Jonathan Cathey is a marketing and branding consultant*

# Letter from Greece: Angelina Giovani's Letter from Greece

**It is a truth universally acknowledged, that every single man or woman in possession of a good fortune or no fortune at all, must at some point be in want of visiting Greece.**

The lure is eternal, as is the sun, the sea, the good food and the wine. In the past decade it has been more important than ever to focus on the positive and keep our eyes towards better days in the near future.

Sadly, the positive near future that we thought would follow the initial shock of the economic downfall, was plagued by nearly all possible disasters one can think of, from natural disasters to social upheavals, to the highest unemployment rate in Europe and the devastating pressure of a global pandemic. And now, we have the terrifying global uncertainty of witnessing the devastating war in Ukraine.

At the current state of the world, it is difficult to get one's self motivated to write anything too positive or upbeat. But what we might have learned over the past couple of years, is that we can live with bad news day in and day out, and adapt. We went from counting the daily Covid-19 infections to counting airstrikes and tanks seemingly overnight. A mysterious disease followed by all these accounts of unnecessary evil all happening on a planet that seems to be on its last breath, might just be what we all needed to shed our old skins and re-adapt.

Greek life is very different today than it was a decade ago, going through changes both good and bad. While the tourist sector is primed to make a full recovery this year, it remains to be seen if this will be enough to carry the country through. It is a fact that tourism income can lead to economic growth – especially in a country where tourism and agriculture wonderfully blend together and offer unparalleled

agritouristic experiences. Even so, Greek agriculture now faces a manpower problem. The age of the average farmer is close to 50 and it is very challenging to recruit new blood at a time when larger cities and the life they promise hold a greater appeal. The pandemic changed this for the better but only to some extent and it's not clear how long those changes will last.

The two first years of the pandemic saw the starkest drop in yearly visitors since World War II. It was detrimental for the islands, the smaller ones in particular, who eagerly await for the summer to generate enough income to last them for the rest of the year. The smaller islands of the Aegean are the ones which feel the greatest strain and who are not as privy to investment and help as mainland Greece and a handful of heavily frequented island destinations.

The Attica region in Athens saw over 40 hotels pop up in 2021 alone with another seven set to open this year in central Athens. These are providing fresh opportunities for local contemporary artists, by offering up the hotel walls for murals, exhibitions and installations. They are destined to become hubs of the local art scene. During the pandemic many of the galleries turned their eyes towards to the intentional art scene, hoping to reach the international audience themselves rather than waiting for them to visit locally. But now, things seem to have take a home-bound turn. A lot of effort has gone into bringing the contemporary and emerging Greek art scene to the forefront. Athens is an old city, with world-famous buildings and ruins, and simultaneously a cradle of incredibly talented new artists. They need to co-exist while not overshadowing each other. This is not the easiest task.

At the same time, the startup scene has flourished compared to previous years. All start ups require an entrepreneurial spirit, and Greece offers that in abundance. Even during the height of the economic crisis and the skyrocketing unemployment rate, Greece had the largest number of self employed people in Europe. This being said, only 36 per cent of Greek startups appear to be receiving international funding, mostly below €50,000. This remains problematic, since it means many young businesses miss the opportunity to expand. The average number of new hires in Greece remains five, which is low compared to other countries. It is expected that over the next years the Greek startup ecosystem will be injected with up to €400 million, but for that to happen the focus needs to be in identifying promising young talent and well oiling the underdeveloped collaborative networks. This will also help attract international recruits and employees.

One can draw up a very long list as to why someone should visit Greece, but people should also think of moving there. You can be very successful, and still live a slower-paced life. You can afford yourself certain everyday luxuries at a relatively affordable price. You can rent a flat with a magnificent view for a fraction of what it would cost in London or Paris. Lastly, and most importantly: you can live out the rest of your days, in the satisfying knowledge that you will never have to settle for average food or a mediocre cup of coffee. In Greece, we know no such thing. *f*

*Angelina Giovani is the co-founder of Flynn Giovani Art Provenance Research. Go to [flynngiovani.com](http://flynngiovani.com).*



# SPECIAL REPORT: DEEP DIVE INTO THE PERSONAL ASSISTANT SECTOR

## Tim Fitzgerald



Tim Fitzgerald

**M**y LinkedIn bio and Masterclass website blurb says...

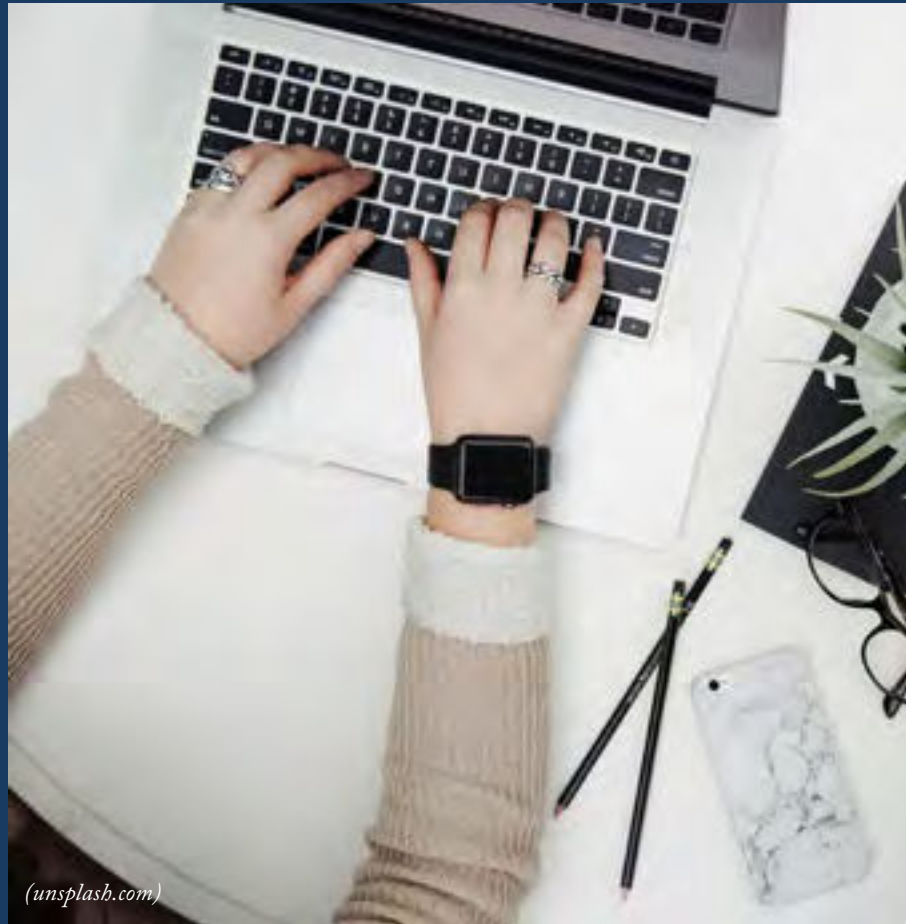
For 20 years, I have been assisting successful and busy HNW individuals and families as a private assistant.

I represent those who need highly experienced and flexible support – someone to represent them confidently, discretely, and efficiently in all matters relating to their private lives.

To my principal(s), I am a personal Swiss Army knife.

I have been featured in The Financial Times, I am consistently approached for the top PA roles, and I am considered one of the best in the market.

All the while, being part of an industry that is only 4% male.



(unsplash.com)

Sounds pretty good, right? What is doesn't say it that I fell into the industry by fluke – and that I blagged and bullshitted my way into one of the most high-profile roles in London at one point. It doesn't say how A/B testing various approaches to things like job applications, CV structure, and interview techniques eventually resulted in success. Nor does it say how personal development and private study led me to some of the winning formulas and ideas that are now part of the one-to-one

courses I give to aspiring assistants, 2nd jobbers, and the experienced PA's and EA's out there..

Would you like to know how I did it?... One word: Mindset.

In my first interview as a PA I only asked one question at the end; more for clarity than anything else. "So, you tell me what you want, I go do it, you're happy and you pay me for doing that. That's it?!". It sounded too good to be

true. What I didn't understand back then is that it can be a nightmare on multiple levels for some people. Many people get stuck on the question of: 'What if'. What if I can do it?! What if I can't find it?! What if I can't arrange it?! But to me that was easy-peasy. My mindset was already in a place: I believe there is a way around everything.

In that first job, it was made clear to me by my principal that, "it is not about you, it's about me". I made her laugh when I replied, "I grew up in an all-female household, so I'm used to being a second class citizen". That was partly a joke, but there was also truth to it. I was already accustomed to not being the centre of attention in a house of two older sisters. The mindset was already there. What I had to learn was the actual job.

I should have been fired at least once a month in that job, but I was fortunate that my principal wanted to mould her PA. She wanted it done in her way. Fast forward ten more years and two more principals and I thought I knew it all. I did not. But what I took with me into new roles was the starting point of 'it's not about me'. That gave me the chance to study the new Principal and find out how to perform. It wasn't about my ego and who I was. That would've only got in the way. I learned to focus on them and to figure out the rest out as I went.

After 21 years in the sector, I can now be found working for a lovely family and using all of my know-how and every single one of my skills to make sure they have smooth sailing in their lives.

### The Job Itself

Wikipedia: A personal assistant, also referred to as personal aide or personal

secretary, is a job title describing a person who assists a specific person with their daily business or personal tasks

I agree. That is what a personal assistant does. What it doesn't tell you is who a personal assistant is, or what makes you succeed or fail as one. It also doesn't tell you which innate abilities lead to doing the job well, or which character traits translate into being a PA. Finally, it doesn't tell you what mindset is required to perform at the top level and earn the top money.

What I discovered in just three short phone calls over the course of a weekend at the end of Summer '21, changed not only my understanding of the sector but what it was most definitely lacking.

**“My mindset was already in a place: I believe there is a way around everything.”**

### ThePAmasterclass.com

I was messaged by three contacts of mine asking for help with various arrangements. These were highly successful people within their respective industries, all with their own assistants. Why on earth did they have to ask me for help? This was especially odd as what they needed in each instance was easily accomplished. Clearly, they didn't feel their own assistants were capable.

Out of a sense of frustration I jumped onto LinkedIn on the Monday morning and told everyone that I was going to upgrade anyone who wanted

it. I would lift the veil, and tell the truth, and hand over all the tips and tricks of my trade, and instil a new way of thinking. I would launch a closed-door Masterclass for 20 people with one of London's leading personal assistants.

72 hours later I was sold out! This was a surprise. I didn't have a website, venue, or even talking points. I spent the next week building a shoddy site, putting together a curriculum, and begging for venue space among my contacts.

What I anticipated being a four-hour session turned into eight hours. I thought it would just be listening ears, but the day turned into a deep dive workshop and lengthy Q&A. Each attendee had their own needs and wants. I realised that there was no one-size-fits-all formula for upgrading an executive assistant / personal assistant. That then became the first and last group Masterclass.

I have since moved to one-on-one sessions where I cater to exactly the areas the pupil wishes to focus on or needs the most. I have FaceTime and IRL sessions with self-funding individuals, have been booked by employers wanting a tailor-made session for their existing assistant (minus the 'job hunting' part of the curriculum). I have conducted group sessions for a company's team of assistants with a focus on mindset. I have also become part of an HR onboarding package for new assistants joining the firm; it is a way to iron out any creases and make sure assistants are at their best in their first week.

Whether corporate or private bookings, my intention has stayed the same; to not only provide valuable abundant content but also the opportunity to benefit from



my support and advice after the Masterclass.

#### The Sector as a Whole

There are two main job titles that ultimately make up the industry.

An Executive Assistant is someone who typically supports in a business capacity in a 9-5 office environment. The role involves diary management, travel arrangements, expense reconciliation, call handling, and some light personal arrangements. It tends to attract those who have an interest in business to some degree and who like structure and a team or office environment.

A Personal Assistant is a broad term but typically revolves around the lifestyle and personal requirements of the principal. No two days are ever the same; just as no two days are ever the same for anyone's personal life. Social, travel, family, extended family, medical, household, and research and procurement can be just some of the items that feature in the assistant's day. Those who do well in this role enjoy being of help and have a genuine love of variety.

The support sector is large. According to a longstanding and well-known recruitment agency, 18,000 people are new to the sector each year. The average personal assistant salary in London is £37,134. This is 24.6 per cent more than the average national salary for personal assistant jobs. Personal assistant jobs in London have gone up 37.7 per cent year-on-year as have the job vacancies. As of writing, there are currently 6,236 London personal assistant vacancies.

By comparison, executive assistant salary average is only slightly higher at £38,704. Vacancies in London

however have only gone up 1.0 per cent year-on-year. As of writing, there are 1,588 London executive assistant jobs. This would go to suggest that there is a growing demand for personal assistants and that the pandemic affected the number of EA's required in office spaces. Maybe.

The top executive assistants in London can earn £70,000 pa and a top earning personal assistant can pull £85,000 pa. With longevity and generous employers, these roles can see six-figures when bonuses are factored in.

#### Who's Hiring?

With the advent of the remote working Virtual Assistant, even relatively low earners can get business or personal support of some kind. I have seen all walks of life advertise for an assistant. Old money, new money, celebrities (from A-D), foreign wealth, new to London, occasional visitors, relocators, musicians, authors, start-up entrepreneurs, overwhelmed single parents, the list goes on. In general, it is the overwhelmed who seek private support.

**“The top executive assistants in London can earn £70,000 pa and a top earning personal assistant can pull £85,000 pa.”**

#### The Future of the Sector

10 years ago, before Open Table or Seven Rooms, to get a seat at a top London eatery took connections and savvy. Equally, the reservations desk

needed to be diary magicians to fit all the VIPs in. Now, and even more so since the pandemic, these apps are not only the interface for the diner but also for the restaurant. The availability you see, is what they see.

My point? I don't see a time when the principal will login to something in order to make all the arrangements they need when they can pick up the phone to someone who knows them personally; who knows what they like and how they like it done. Only so much can be done by the principal themselves before the overload happens again.

In short, the assistant isn't going anywhere. It doesn't matter who is reading this – if I gave you me for the day, I would be rushed off my feet with all the to-do's you have in your life. Wealth or success just adds to the list.

#### What's next?

I am writing a guidebook based on my sessions of The PA Masterclass. It distils the curriculum into the essential information to help those who are considering the industry or getting back into it after time away. It's also geared to help the move from 1st to 2nd job.

Unfortunately, I can't see everyone who requests the Masterclass as I'm in a live role and short on spare time. Also, not everyone can afford the Masterclass but I want to be able to give advice to anyone who needs it in whichever way I can. [f](#)

# Culture, Books & Travel

Judi Dench (*Wikipedia.org*)

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# Meet Melanie Walker: Fashion Designer turned Artist

BY PATRICK CROWDER

**M**elanie Walker discovered the world of art at a young age, but it took the pandemic for her to return to her first love of drawing. She worked in luxury fashion with big names, including Victoria Beckham, Roland Mouret, and Jonathan Saunders for fifteen years. Now, she has turned her attention back to fine art, launching a new website to promote and sell her works. We spoke with Walker about her passion for art, her time in the fashion industry, her unique style, and how young people can get a start in the industry.

“When I was at school, I always loved art, and I always loved to draw. In my A-level art, I then had an opportunity to think ‘what do I want to do next’, and I’d heard about art foundation courses. I applied to Wimbledon College of Art, and I got a place on their foundation course, which was phenomenal. And really, that was the first time in my life where I felt like I was surrounded by like-minded people. I loved school, I found academia okay, but my strengths were always in the arts. So suddenly to be surrounded by so many like-minded people who loved creativity, who loved visual arts, it was just fantastic,” Walker says.

Though Walker had a passion for fine art, she feared that it would be a solitary career, so she decided to go into fashion, specialising in the subject in college.



Charcoal Figure Expression

“I then had a deferred entry from school to go and study History of Art at Nottingham University,” Walker says, “I chose that, and I went to Nottingham University after my foundation course, and then very, very quickly, I realised I had made the wrong decision.”

At Nottingham University Walker

found that art history has more to do with the people in the paintings than how they were actually created, which is what she was interested in. So she took a year out to reapply.

“I ended up going to Bristol UWE and started studying fashion design there for three years,” Walker says, “And that summer that I took out



Lady on a Stool

I did an incredible summer course out in Florence, which was at the Charles Cecil studios. And that was phenomenal. It really trains your eye and it’s an intensive drawing school right back to plumb line drawing from Leonardo da Vinci. So that for me was a phenomenal experience where I was solely life drawing.”

After leaving Nottingham, Walker was determined to make the most out of her time at Bristol. She left with a first and quickly found an internship with Roland Mouret. There, she got her first real taste of the fashion industry

working on their development team.

“I could see everything from the start of the conception of a dress, right through from development to production, and then on to sales, and then shipping. We had in-house press as well. So for me, as a youngster coming out of university, that was a phenomenal experience,” Walker says.

Walker worked in development with Mouret for three years. She enjoyed her first job outside of university, but she realised that she was missing the design aspect of her work, so Walker decided to change course.

“I decided to leave there, and I freelanced for a while with Jonathan Saunders, who’s a print designer, helping him out on development and production. And then I got my first design job, which was with FREDa at Matches,” Walker says, “So I freelanced on the two jobs for a while, and then they became too much. I chose the Head of Design role at Matches designing for FREDa purely because it was a design post. So then I worked there full time for a year as a designer.”

**“I think degrees are fundamental, to learn technical skills of making clothing and to progress as a designer, but they do not prepare you for the outside world in the fashion industry.”**

Throughout her years working in fashion, Walker kept up with Mouret. When she was ready for a change, he was there to help her into the next step of her journey with Victoria Beckham.

“I remember I saw him at a show one year and I said, ‘you know, I think I’m looking to move on’, and it was he who put me in contact with Victoria Beckham. I helped Victoria set up her label, and I ended up working there for, gosh, I think it was nine and a half years,” Walker says, “I was building the team, working with her, starting from





Lady on with a head scarf

such a small unit. It was an amazing experience, incredible experience. I've never been in a company that grew so quickly, and I felt like I was really being challenged, I learned so much."

Many people face the same uncertainties in university that Walker faced at Nottingham, and a shift in direction during study is often stigmatised. Walker credits her conviction of will and the support of her parents with making the transition from art history a smooth one.

"I think my parents were perhaps concerned how I would earn money in fashion, just because it was such

an alien area for them. But they were both extremely supportive, and I think that's what enabled me to have the confidence. And I felt so strongly about it. It's difficult when you're young, you know, you have to get into an environment and understand whether it's the right thing for you, but I really, really knew after a term that it was not the right area for me, and I really missed creating and making that tangible art, essentially -whether it's drawing or whether it's making clothing. So for me, it was a no brainer, and thankfully, I had the support of my parents to make that

that change," Walker says.

Walker's time in the fashion industry led her to many amazing experiences and opportunities, but it also left little time for her passion of life drawing. After fashion, she went into consulting, which allowed her to make time for her children and her art.

"For me, life drawing, and drawing of the figure has been something that I've always loved. But once you get out into the work environment, I always found it so difficult to get to any life drawing classes. The hours in fashion are very long, I would be working late into the night most often, and I could never really make the classes," Walker says, "So it was always just a hobby that I'd sort of parked to the side. Once I left Victoria Beckham I was consulting, and I have three kids now. So for me consulting was a way that I could work near my children, and fit work into my family lifestyle, it's been great."

Walker's style is characterised by minimalistic, thoughtfully placed lines which imply the full shape of a figure while leaving some to the imagination. When she does use colour, it is usually only a splash to emphasise the most important elements of her artworks.

"I've always loved a pure line," Walker says, "I've always been immediately drawn to really minimal charcoal sketch. So if you can imagine all of Picasso's drawings that he does of a minimal bird or a figure, if I'm in an exhibition, I go straight to those. There's also Giacometti - he does phenomenal sculpture, but also really beautiful quick line sketches of figures or portraiture. So for me, it's always been something I've been quite obsessed with. And I think it's so beautiful when you see an image that is just drawn, and it's the right line.

It's hard to do, but when it works, I think it's really beautiful."

Now, Walker is focusing on her new art venture, but she did give some insightful advice for young people hoping to break into the fashion industry.

**"Don't be shy about approaching people. If you're trying to get an internship, write to ten different brands that you love, ask if there are any internships or apprenticeships open and be prepared to graft."**

"Don't be shy about approaching people. If you're trying to get an internship, write to ten different brands that you love, ask if there are any internships or apprenticeships open and be prepared to graft - you have to work really hard - be prepared to do anything from making the coffee, taking out the bins, or whatever might need to be done. I think if you're open minded, and you work hard, and you have a good attitude, you turn up on time, anything's possible," Walker says, "I think people think that the fashion world is elite, and it's a closed book, and you have to know somebody. But more often than not, it's really easy to find email addresses on websites and just write to brands and ask if they have any openings, don't be afraid to chase. And now that we have platforms like Instagram, it's much

Kimono Pattern



easier to be able to reach people."

A degree can go a long way towards success in fashion, but according to Walker, it is not the be-all and end-all you might find it to be in other professions. Rather, opportunities may come from internships, or simply talking to the right people and demonstrating passion.

"I think degrees are fundamental, to learn technical skills of making clothing and to progress as a designer, but they do not prepare you for the outside world in the fashion industry. So I think an apprenticeship is equally valuable. So

for example, if you come out of school or art college, and want to gain an apprenticeship within a design studio, and then grow within that, that's equally valuable. But a BA course or an MA obviously is held in high regard, and you do learn a lot on those courses. But I think gaining internships and insights into companies and experience is invaluable as well," Walker says. f

Go to: <https://melaniewalkerillustration.com/pages/portfolio>



# Belfast: a tale about how work changes us

BY CHRISTOPHER JACKSON



Still from Branagh's *Belfast* a Focus Features release. (Credit: Rob Youngson / Focus Features)

**T**he stature of Kenneth Branagh isn't in doubt, though I have sometimes heard people prepared to whisper in tiny voices their slight doubts about his acting. For some, this began with his slightly self-indulgent and extraordinarily long turn as Hamlet in 1996. I will always remember his adolescent delivery of the famous line 'Words, words, words' with embarrassment.

But Branagh is a particularly complicated figure if you happen to be a fan of David Suchet's Poirot. It is very hard to think of a better performance in modern television. Given that Suchet only

finished the role recently it is evidence of alarming ego that Branagh has recently felt the need to take on the role himself in two bizarre offerings: *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) and *Death on the Nile* (2022). We didn't need another Poirot at all, but what we got was a bad one to spoil the memory of a marvellous one.

Even so, a cultural figure of Branagh's sway will always attract funding for new films and it must be said it's very good news that those who provided funding for this didn't hold his role as the Belgian detective against him. Partly because the film is a tender reckoning with his own

past, and partly because he has eschewed vanity by wisely deciding not to be in it, Branagh has rebounded from his Poirot nadir to produce something superb. The film makes you wonder what Branagh might have achieved if he'd only been an author and a director. Perhaps his stature would have been even greater.

All the promotional material for *Belfast* is in black and white. So it comes as something of a surprise to find that the first shots in the film are in colour.

This is contemporary Belfast, not Belfast as you might have expected from the posters: a collage of shots of a very modern city. These opening scenes are



Writer/director Kenneth Branagh on the set of *Belfast*, a Focus Features release. (Credit: Rob Youngson / Focus Features)



Caitriona Balfe (left) stars as "Ma" and Jamie Dornan (right) stars as "Pa" in director Sir Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast*, a Focus Features release. (Credit: Rob Youngson / Focus Features)

beautifully shot but they make the viewer feel that Belfast today is a city whose optics are like any other. It is a place of neoliberal prosperity, in thrall to the automobile: another weekend destination where might expect our museums and galleries, a zoo, bars and restaurants and so forth. Only once Belfast today is shown, does the film shed colour and then we travel back in time to the August 1969 riots.

It's a clever but not showy device – a way of establishing at the outset that this isn't just a story about an Ulster Protestant family – Kenneth Branagh's family, as it happens – but about a collective people. *Belfast* aspires to be a tale of historical dimensions. In being a story about a city, it is also a tale about a city's economy and the way in which our work changes us, and how we change as a community according to economic need.

Of course, it's also many things besides. The story is told predominantly through the eyes of Buddy (Jude Hill), whose family includes Ma (Caitriona Balfe), Pa (Jamie Dornan), Granny (Judi Dench) and Pop (Ciaran Hinds). The film begins with the harrowing scenes of August 1969: a group of Protestant loyalists

attacking the houses of Catholics who live on Buddy's street.

We are brought straight into the stress and flux of history: this is a film which insists on the instability of life, and celebrates whatever it is we can do to push back against that – primarily, the family and the community. Buddy will grow up then in a world seemingly defined by tribalism, but a world also of incipient globalisation. This is the conflict that makes the film, and with the rise of various nationalism around the world, it is also one of the defining aspects of our current lives. This isn't one of those films that aspires heavy-handedly to be relevant, but by being true it does speak to the present moment.

The tribal aspect of the Belfast Branagh grew up in is told primarily through the figure of Billy Clanton (Colin Morgan) who turns up menacingly on Buddy's street to threaten Buddy's father about his refusal to join in with the persecution of Catholics. "We're looking to cleanse the community a wee bit," he says. "You wouldn't want to be the odd man out in this street. You saw what happened to your neighbours on the other side." Pa's refusal to do so is connected to his

decency and the sense he has of himself as being a person beyond the clashes of the past. He wishes instead to attach himself to the global economy: he already works in England, but dreams also of far-flung places like Sydney and Vancouver. Ma is a little horrified by this though, and feels she would miss the Belfast they would be leaving behind.

This then is a film about Belfast becoming an unsafe place, one defined by sectarian religious conflict. The story is really a simple one about whether the family should leave or not. As the world knows, Branagh's destiny was to seek remedy in departure. He became a global star, and I suspect has been to Sydney and Vancouver, and everywhere else many times.

But he is too smart, and has too good a memory of what he left behind, not to leave us with this elegy to the Belfast that was. This *Belfast* is told primarily through Judi Dench's wise performance as Granny and Ciaran Hinds' equally thought-provoking turn as Pop. This was the generation whose destiny it was not to leave the country; it wasn't always their destiny to go to the cinema in which Branagh would make his career.





Branagh on the set of *Belfast*  
a Focus Features release. (Credit: Rob Youngson / Focus Features)

The cinema is a repeated theme. Every time a new film arrives in the cinema it is a temptation to give up Belfast and join the future. I suspect the choice of Christian name – Buddy – was chosen as a nod to Buddy Holly, and that whole world of Americana which was already alluring to the Pops of that world.

But what would that globalised world replace, and what did we lose by discarding it? This film tells us, and it can seem like a lot. The Belfast of 1969 was more complicated than ours: the religious conflicts were complex, and still to some extent linked to a far more nuanced reading of the Bible – and of theology and history – than people tend to attempt today. And yet it was also simpler insofar as everybody was closer to nature, and free of the distraction of multiple streaming services and the addiction of the Internet. This in turn meant that an oral family culture was still possible. One day in a street party, Pa shares an Irish joke worth repeating in full:

So the doctor says, “Listen John, I’ve got some bad news and worse.” And John says, “Oh no. What’s the bad news?” And he says, “Well, you’ve only got twenty-

four hours to live.” John says: “That’s awful. What could be worse than that?” Doctor says, “Well, I’ve been trying to get hold of you since yesterday.”

It’s a very Irish joke: the sort of thing you hear and repeat, and above all which you hand down to your children for them to tell their children. Our world by comparison looks desperately fragmented and Branagh knows this without wagging his finger at the viewer.

Throughout this film, Dench serves as a disquieting emblem of loss. She silently knits, or watches, or tells the old stories. Her humour feels timeless, tethered to the past. She knows it is her destiny to stay, and also that it is her destiny to be alone.

That’s the case as she is destined to outlive her husband, but also because she must watch the global economy happen to her children and grandchildren without being able to take part in it herself. History is cruel like this.

We never leave the past behind with full confidence and we are never wholly right to do so. We lose something even as we seem to gain so much and it is strongly

implied in Branagh’s film that one thing we lose as we enter the modern economy is a true sense of family. The family in the film live on top of one another, always in hearing distance of each other’s doings, and sharing the same outside toilet. This is sort of close family life is no longer likely once wealth has atomised society. And yet in their shared lore, and their links to the deep past, they seem richer somehow.

This richness is shown not only in the film’s depiction of family, but also in what it says about community. Branagh’s Belfast is a more intimate world where children are able to walk around the streets safe in the knowledge that everybody knows who they are. It is a world where surrogate parents who will watch out for the moral condition and the well-being of the children in the neighbourhood. We’re too busy to do that today.

In such a world, we’re more likely to do what our parents did for a living or what our grandparents did for a living. In our new world, we have more options – in Pa’s words ‘a better chance’ – but we might drift eternally not sure what that

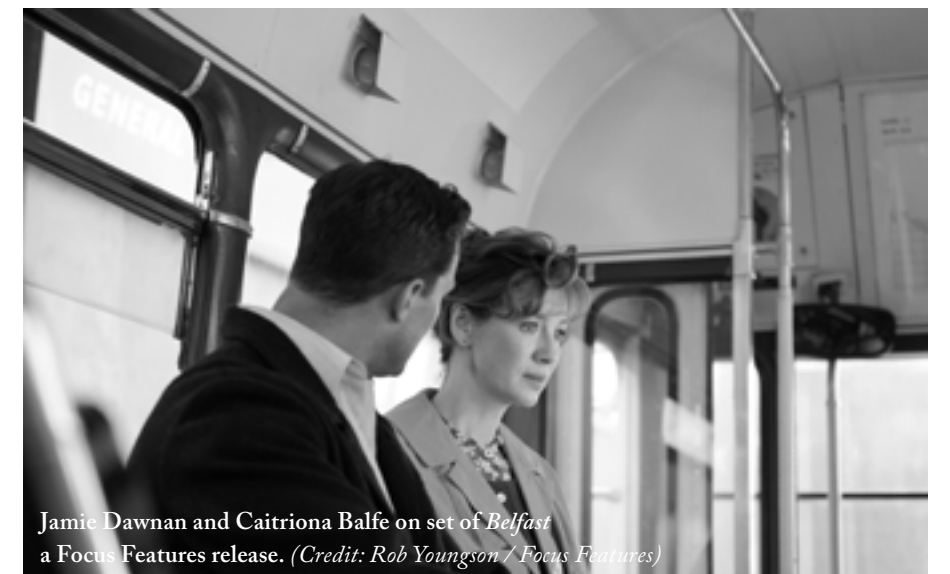
‘better chance’ entails for us. Blessed with talent, Branagh did not experience that, but I think he can see that globalisation was one thing for him and something else for countless others. The decision to leave Belfast wasn’t easy and it still isn’t: in making the film at all, Branagh is no doubt admitting that the past still isn’t clear to him. The film is dedicated to those who left and to those who stayed: Branagh is saying that both decisions are valid.

This is a film which preserves so much that needed to be preserved. I will never forget the wisdom on the face of Judi Dench as she watches the family leave on the bus towards the end, to go to the airport to start their new life.

She knows much about life, but she knows all that from having lived in one street among a small number of people. She will never leave her country. She will not travel all over the world as her grandson will do. She will not win awards, or be feted by crowds. She will not live in large houses with swimming pools. She will not know the inside of an aeroplane. She’ll not log onto a computer. She’ll not have a mobile phone.

She may not do all these things, but she may still be wise. She may be even wiser than we are. That is what this film has to say. It reminds us that shiny newness is often inferior to what we might have come to think of as shabby and outdated. And our choices have a terrible finality about then: we can never go back to what the world was before.

As the film moves towards its head we see again the bright technicolour images of modern Belfast return. We now know that it didn’t have to be this way: but it became this way because millions of people made the same decision as Pa. They wanted a ‘better chance’ for themselves and for their children. [f](#)



Jamie Dornan and Caitriona Balfe on set of *Belfast*  
a Focus Features release. (Credit: Rob Youngson / Focus Features)



Judi Dench on set of *Belfast*  
a Focus Features release. Credit: Rob Youngson / Focus Features





# Snooker at 147: opportunities in the snooker industry

BY PATRICK CROWDER



(Credit: World Snooker Press Pack)

**I**t's a special year for snooker. Not only are crowds returning to Sheffield's famous Crucible Theatre to see the action, but the game itself is celebrating a one-of-a-kind birthday. The cue sport which has captivated fans all over the world was first played in India in 1875, making this year snooker's 147th anniversary.

That number (147) is important to players and fans because it represents the maximum number of points which can be scored in a single snooker frame. This incredible feat was first performed on television in 1982 by Steve Davis; many fans will also remember Cliff Thorburn's 147 in 1983, the first time any player pulled it off at the World Championships. Since then, many players have made maximum breaks, but none

faster than Ronnie O'Sullivan who cleared the table in just five minutes and twenty seconds during the 1997 World Championship.

To celebrate the long-standing tradition of snooker, we're taking a look at the whole industry from amateur leagues to the top levels to see what lies ahead for the sport.

## Local clubs – the heart of snooker

If you've ever played a casual frame of snooker, you've probably done so at a snooker hall. Though snooker halls are not as packed as they were during the height of their popularity in the 1980s and 90s, there are still many places to play dotted around the country.

The backbone of snooker today does not come from massive television viewership or pro players' star power, but rather from amateur players who form a community of people who love the sport.

One such player is Pete Przednowek. Przednowek frequents London snooker halls playing matches with his friends while bringing new players such as myself into the group as well. For him, snooker has been a lifelong passion.

"My dad bought me a little table-top four foot table when I was around eight years old, and it was the best thing to ever come my way," Przednowek says, "I was hooked from the start, and as soon as I was old and tall enough I started playing on full size tables in clubs."

For most amateur players, snooker is a



(Credit: World Snooker Press Pack)

way to compete with friends in a friendly environment with the only goal being to have a bit of fun. For Przednowek, that's what his relationship with the game started out as, but he soon found himself wanting to take things to the next level by entering competitions.

"I had my first experience playing in snooker tournaments at my local club in Croydon around the age of 16," Przednowek says, "I got my ass whooped most of the time but I loved it all the same, and it made me realise that there is no better way to improve in sport than putting yourself out there and playing against random opponents who are better than you a lot of the time."

He continued to play through his days in university where he developed an appetite for American pool. After a few years of casually playing 9-ball, he decided to return to his first love.

"I started playing snooker again more regularly not long before the pandemic struck. Then once the lockdowns were lifted, around April 2021, me and a few of my mates started playing more and more," Przednowek says, "There were around six of us who had 'caught the snooker bug', so I decided to organise a little league between us all, with weekly matches, where we all play each other

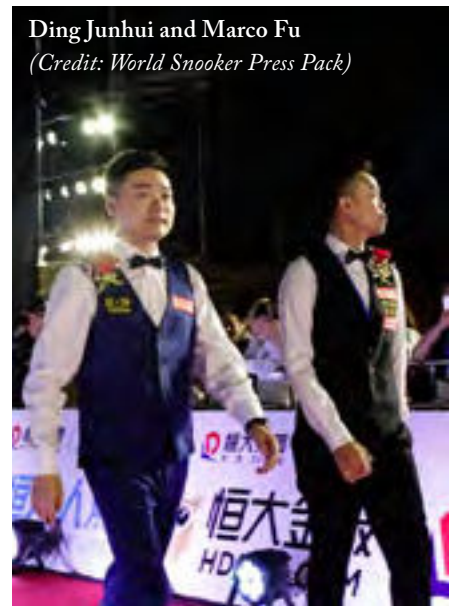
once over the course of a mini-season."

Dedicated amateur players keep snooker halls alive, and the fine folks at Cousin's Professional Snooker in Seven Sisters rely on players like Przednowek for business.

Cousin's is a family business and takes a slightly different approach than other clubs. At Cousin's, respect for other players and staff is paramount. There are the typical notices posted reminding members to keep quiet and respect other people, yes, but it is an atmosphere which fosters such a welcoming community environment.

People who come to Cousin's feel no pressure to immediately rent a table or buy a drink. Instead, the owners view it as more of a community centre for members to come, relax, watch whatever cue sport is on the television, and feel like a part of a larger group with a shared interest. In another departure from snooker hall norms, their £30 membership lasts for life. I spoke with Paul O'Neill, who has worked on and off at Cousin's for over 30 years, to ask him what makes Cousin's a different sort of club.

"Cousin's is a family-run business, which I think makes a big difference. We've only got two clubs in London, so it's different from some of the chains," O'Neill says, "It was established back in 2002 as a



Ding Junhui and Marco Fu  
(Credit: World Snooker Press Pack)

members club, and both of our locations are totally multicultural, we're all different colours and creeds here. Snooker clubs have had a bad reputation traditionally as smoke-filled dens of iniquity, but we at Cousin's had a vision to change peoples' perspective. Our aim is to attract snooker and pool lovers of all ages and to be a meeting point for good characters from all walks of life. We've got fathers and mothers bringing their children here in the afternoon to play because it's a relaxed, friendly, peaceful club."

During the pandemic, many billiards halls struggled, and some even had to shut down. Cousin's had to follow the same restrictions as any other place where people gather, but O'Neill says that the clientele at Cousin's were eager to support the club and get back on the tables again.

"The last time that we reopened was a Monday, and we were full up. We had a waiting list for people to get on the tables on that day, everyone was so eager to play because it's a very addictive sport if you like. They were missing it because they couldn't go anywhere to play a game of pool, not even to a pub, so it was just completely off the list. So when we opened up on Monday it was absolutely packed in there – it was the busiest Monday we've ever had," O'Neill says.





(Credit: World Snooker Press Pack)

Not only are clubs like Cousin's a safe, friendly environment to have a game, but they're also places to meet people from all walks of life. In my experience, Cousin's is more than a snooker club, it's a way to meet people with similar interests and connect. Snooker provides the common ground, so you can always talk about what's happening on the table, but quickly a few frames with someone you met that day can turn into a lifelong friendship. O'Neill explains how Cousin's helps all kinds of people connect.

"There aren't a lot of places now, in fact I don't know any, that have so many different colours and creeds under one roof. All of the community centres have been closed down over the years, so people don't get together anymore. But at least at Cousin's we have all different nationalities mixing, they all meet at the club and become friends," O'Neill says, "It really does bring people together, and that's all we were hoping to do. There is still a lot of racism that goes on in this country, and this makes people open their eyes up and see that we all have the same personalities. Thank God for sport, it's a great way for people to meet and understand each other."

As a family-run and family-oriented club, Cousin's provides a place for young

people to meet in a safe environment. O'Neill has seen personally the way that having a healthy way to enjoy yourself can have a great effect on your life.

"There are a lot of youngsters who have gone the right way because of the club. They spend a couple of hours here after school and they go home instead of staying out on the streets and getting into trouble," O'Neill says, "Without snooker I have no idea what would have happened to me because I grew up around all sorts of different people and influences, but I was in the club playing snooker instead of getting involved in anything else."

#### Lessons with the pros

If you've never played snooker before, believe me, it's harder than it looks. On a good day, the pros can make it look like the balls have a natural desire to find the pockets, and fly in willingly, with a good amount of pace. For a player like me, a good day is potting a few in a row, and even then, they're rattling their way in, looking for any opportunity to bounce out. Thankfully, I'm not the only one with this problem, and coaches like John Woods are here to help.

Woods has been a snooker coach since 2010, when he passed the World Snooker

Grade A coaching course in Sheffield, but he has been a snooker player for nearly his entire life. Just after leaving school, he found a job at his local snooker hall – a smart move for a young player looking to pay to enter tournaments, not to mention that snooker hall employees can normally play for free. Since then, his working life has been centred around snooker.

"I was playing in the qualifiers in the lower tier of the game – I was never full time, I went to work to fund myself," Woods says, "It's difficult in any sport to fund yourself I think, and it reached a point where it was just too much. There was personal stuff going on at home, so I couldn't fully commit to it. So I went into coaching."

He set up his business, Gone2Pot Snooker, and started finding students. Now, he is the main coach for all of Central London, providing instruction to players at more than five snooker halls. He coaches plenty of adults like me who hope to improve their game, but he also runs a kid's club at the Hurricane Room in King's Cross. There, he teaches total beginners, and helps them grow in both technical and mental skill, whatever their end goal may be.

"With the kid's club we usually start off keeping it pretty fun, and you can see the ones who want to take it more seriously. We've got kids at the club who just want to play for fun – some kids go to football on a Saturday, some go to the cinema, and some like a game of snooker or pool on a Saturday morning, and it's just a bit of fun and games. But obviously, you'll get the ones who go: 'Hold on, I think I like this'. Then, Mum and Dad will go: 'Alright, how do we move forward with this?' Then we work out coaching for them and see where it goes from there," Woods says. "We've got a massive academy going on – players competing in National events, players close to turning

pro, and they all started off at the kid's club."

When Woods earned his Grade A coaching badge, it was the highest qualification offered by the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association (WPBSA). Since then, they have changed the ranking system to three levels.

"The level three is very intensive, the level two is fairly intensive, and the level one is essentially a guaranteed pass. You don't have to be a great player to be a level one coach, you've just got to have a knowledge of the game, and a passion about growing the game. You can get a level one badge fairly easily as a snooker enthusiast."

In my session with Woods, he focused on the fundamentals first before moving on to practice routines. It turns out that, subconsciously, I had been holding the cue with an odd grip which was throwing me off the line of the shot. Once corrected, I had to get used to the adjustment, but eventually it felt as natural as the way I had been playing before.

Keen to tap into the natural inclination most snooker players have to keep score of themselves, Woods showed me a practice routine which would measure my progression as I continued with it. By completing a series of exercises designed to test my potting angles, straight cuing, and technique, I was able to set a baseline score for myself based on the number of exercises I completed successfully. We found lots of room for improvement, so you'll probably find me down at the snooker hall when I'm not writing articles for Finito World...

#### The big leagues

We've seen how people are creating careers and lives in snooker without going pro as players, but I was keen to

get a look at snooker at the top levels as well. I went down to the 2022 BetVictor European Masters in Milton Keynes to see the action.

Top players faced off at the event, including veteran Graeme Dott going up against Ryan Day, Fan Zhengyi versus David Gilbert, and Liang Wenbo facing off against Scottish favourite Anthony McGill. But the main draw of the event was Ronnie O'Sullivan taking on Tom Ford. During that match, the crowd was notably more energised than they were in previous pairings, and O'Sullivan was on top form. In the first frame of the match, O'Sullivan scored a century break with apparent ease to a crowd of cheering fans – a feat which he repeated later that night.

In between the action, I was also able to get a glimpse behind the scenes. I talked to Ivan Hirschowitz, who is the Head of Media for WST, to find out about his role in growing and promoting the game around the world.

"I suppose our biggest ambition is to grow snooker as much as we can throughout the world, so from a media perspective we're always trying to reach new people through our different platforms. And one of our biggest challenges is promoting our players – they're the role models. We want to bring lots of young people into the sport, and people will look up to the Judd Trumps and Ronnie O'Sullivans, so one of our big priorities is to show our players' personalities through our social media and video content," Hirschowitz says.

The only way for snooker to continue to grow is for young children to have the opportunity to play and take to the sport, but older perceptions of snooker can damage the chances that a parent will choose snooker for their child over something like football or cricket. One of the main issues has to do with the

seeming lack of physicality in snooker – parents want their children running around, exercising, and breathing fresh air, and as Hirschowitz explains, that's not the image which often comes to mind when talking about snooker.

"I think one of our hangovers from the 80s is that perception of the smoky snooker hall, and that's one of the things we've got to try to move away from and give snooker a younger, fresher feel to it. Any time there's a snooker player who's into fitness we're all over it, and we'll go and do a story about it. If we can promote the idea of snooker as a physical sport then we jump at the chance to do that," Hirschowitz says, "The other good thing about snooker is the mathematical element, so it is quite good for kids to learn their maths and we've done some school programmes surrounding that. So I think we do get the fact that some people might not perceive it as a sport which has a lot of benefits for kids, but actually it does. There's a guy named Rohit Sagoo who wrote a really good thesis on the benefits for mental health in snooker, like the fact that when you're there potting the balls on the table it can be quite therapeutic. It's something that you can do on your own which is quite enjoyable. To me, the other great thing about snooker is the inclusivity of who can play. It doesn't matter your age, nationality, gender, or anything like that – anybody can play against anybody."

As well as Hirschowitz, I also got the chance to talk with Sam Fletcher. He's a snooker player himself, and an author for WST. He remembers the change from his early years in the typical sorts of snooker halls often portrayed in media to the futuristic training facilities such as the Ding JunHui academy today. They trade the smoky practice room for well-lit, white walled training facilities which look towards the future of the sport, not the past. Fletcher also pointed out an often





Ronnie O'Sullivan and Ding Junhui  
(Credit: World Snooker Press Pack)

overlooked draw of snooker – the game's natural beauty.

"I think that's one thing about snooker, with the attire, is that it can be quite an immaculate environment. You go out there and, if you've never been there before, it's sort of like going to a ball or something. The tables are beautiful things in and of themselves, and I think that's important," Fletcher says, "It was so funny to go from a club with dodgy tables to this incredible facility, suddenly I think my mom and dad saw it as a much cleaner pursuit."

Snooker has come into the modern age in terms of training facilities, but most of the big competitions have retained the traditional dress code, which includes a button-down shirt and waistcoat. China's influence on snooker has also greatly increased, and part of the appeal in China comes from the traditional dress code. Jason Ferguson started his career in snooker as a player, and now he is the chairman of the WPBSA and Director of WST. He gave me his view on why some things should remain traditional.

"In China the sport is seen as very high

end – it's dress suits, it's immaculate, it's smart, it's aspirational, and it's very well respected as a high level sport. And what that has done is it's driven a much younger audience. So the audience is very young. Snooker is in schools, it's in universities, you will find young people in clubs, and you will find clubs that are set up for a family environment rather than just billiard halls," Ferguson says, "I think it would be a huge mistake to drop dress code in Asia, generally. The dress code is aspirational. It's looked up to and it's something that people aspire to wear and be part of the sport. We know that the kids are not going to go down their local club in a dress suit every day, but if you're playing competitive, high-level events, that's the level that we're looking for. I think there are some things that need to be preserved."

In addition to keeping long-time fans of the game, Ferguson also has a major interest in introducing young people to snooker. He explains how engagement with young people can change the way they see the game and inspire passion.

"I think every sport in the world is

fighting to get people off of Xboxes and computer games and iPads and things. What we've got to do is use technology to drive participation as well, so we're looking at various ways we can do that. We've got things like CueZone programmes in schools, this involves small folding tables which we designed ourselves for this purpose. If you imagine a table tennis table, you go into a school, you can put ten tables up in ten minutes, and you can create a snooker hall in the hall of the school," Ferguson says, "They're great fun days as well. So the audience is getting younger, and that's very encouraging. And what comes with that is probably an audience with more disposable income, and so on, and that in turn will bring new partners, new sponsors, and new commercial partners to work with."

#### Ronnie "The Rocket" O'Sullivan

After his decisive victory winning 5-1 over Tom Ford, Ronnie walked into the media room and I got a chance to talk with him. It wasn't a long conversation, so here it is in full:

"After a great match like that, what are you doing to celebrate?" I asked.

"Just going to eat some scones," he said, before clarifying, "You're from America?"

"Yes I am."

"So you've heard of scones, clotted cream, and jam?"

I reassured him that I knew what he was talking about, and he continued.

"Oh you have! Well that's what I'm going to be doing tonight, I've got them outside. They've got to be good ones though, I get mine from Marksies. When you get them and they're not great it's just... I can't do it, they're one of my favourite things, you know? If my last meal could be something it'd probably be that."

"In terms of the future of snooker, are there any young players you see coming through who impress you?"

"I don't have opinions on anything to do with snooker, other than I wish all the guys the best of luck. It's a great game, great sport, I hope they all get whatever they desire from it. I'm a snooker man through and through, so yeah – whatever they get, times it by twenty and I'll be happy for them."

"Can you tell me what makes a match enjoyable for you?"

"It's really difficult to say, I'm not sure if I really get enjoyment out of it, it's just sort of like – it's just a challenge, you know, I just enjoy sort of putting myself through a test I suppose, that's about it really. It asks questions of me, and I just try to stay on top of it which is a success in itself, you know?"

"How much of it would you say you do for the fans?"

"I've never really done it for the fans, but as I get a bit older in my age... you look back and get a bit more nostalgic and a bit more, probably, appreciative of



Ronnie O'Sullivan  
(Credit: World Snooker Press Pack)

stuff, and you can kind of mirror yourself with other sportsmen who have done other stuff similar to you and you can see how people react to them and think, well I have the same with the snooker fans. So listen, you know, I've got a great relationship with the fans and hopefully they've been entertained over the years."

O'Sullivan's attitude towards questions about snooker here is fairly typical of how he's been answering recently, and maybe there's a good lesson in that. His general mantra these days is that he's not too bothered about winning or losing, he doesn't want to get into discussions about the future of snooker, and he is playing for his own enjoyment. Especially in a sport like snooker where the mental side of the game is so important, a certain level of detachment seems like a good strategy after being in the spotlight for nearly 30 years.

Let me make one thing clear: Ronnie O'Sullivan still cares about his level of play, and he still takes snooker very seriously. No matter what he says in interviews, you can see his dedication manifest on the table when he plays. So what if we applied O'Sullivan's mental approach to our own lives? Let's say you're a fresh graduate whose applications seem to be getting lost in the crowd when

applying to your dream companies, as so often seems to be the struggle. Don't stop caring, of course, but try not taking every rollercoaster ride. Just like snooker, the game of success is largely mental, and it's easy to get bogged down with self-doubt and disappointment when something you've worked so hard for isn't coming to fruition the way you'd hoped. Be like Ronnie: Keep on pushing, keep your standards high, but there's no need to engage with every setback or stress about things beyond the scope of what you're trying to accomplish. When O'Sullivan comes to play snooker, he plays snooker. Nothing else matters in that moment, and the best way to avoid turning mistakes into larger issues is to let anger and disappointment fall like water off a duck's back.

There is a lot of opportunity in snooker. There is the opportunity to play at a high level and go pro, definitely, but more than that there is the opportunity to be a part of a community, to teach others, to concentrate on improving your own game and maybe even learn something about yourself in the process. Snooker has a long history, and thanks to the people who I talked to in this piece, and all others who have a deep passion for the sport, it looks like snooker has a long future ahead. [f](#)



# Book Reviews

## The Presidents: 250 Years of American Political Leadership

BY IAIN DALE

**Why do we find ourselves so interested in Presidents? For many people the interest is really in the drama of their rise and fall. Enoch Powell's line that all politicians end in failure remains true: every president arrives in office with such high hopes and the world remains just as fallen at the outset of their presidencies as it does at their beginnings.**

That's always been true but it feels a more and more urgent fact – and you can trace that urgency in Iain Dale's book *The Presidents: 250 Years of American Political Leadership*, which is his follow up to a similar volume of *British Prime Ministers*. (Dale tells us that a third book on *Kings and Queens* is scheduled for 2023.) As you go through this book you feel that each president is becoming more contentious as our frustration grows at the gap between what they promised and what they actually achieved.

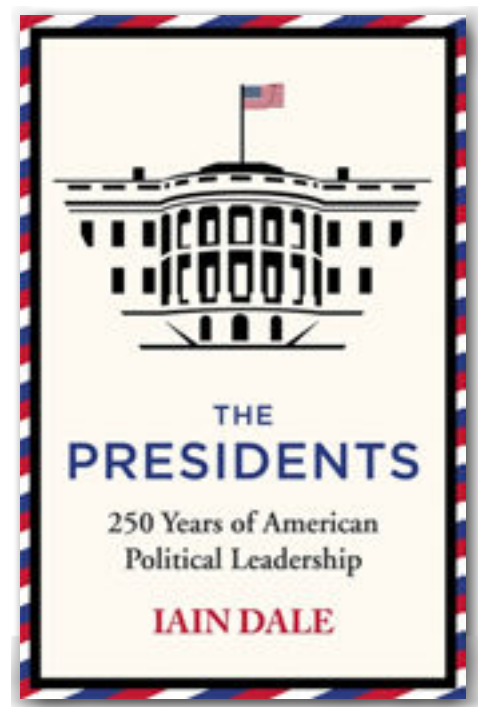
The idea is that each President, no matter how well-known or obscure, is the subject of an essay of around 5-10 pages. Highlights for me include George Osborne displaying a real fascination with Lyndon Johnson; an excellent – and very balanced – essay by Justin Webb about Donald J. Trump which must surely have been the hardest

assignment in here; and a brilliant introduction by Mitchell Reiss on the first president George Washington, about whom I have always wanted to know more.

In general, the essays keep an academic or journalistic distance from their subject – sometimes, as in the case of Osborne, shading into fandom. One wouldn't want to be without Osborne's excellent essay, not just for what it tells us about Johnson but for what it tells us about Osborne. Another standout is a highly personal account by former British ambassador to the United States Christopher Meyer about George W. Bush's presidency. When I spoke with Dale recently he explained that it was different to the others and that as an editor he faced a decision as to whether to do anything with it to bring it in line with the rest of the book. He made the right decision.

**The idea is that each President, no matter how well-known or obscure, is the subject of an essay of around 5-10 pages.**

In this essay, we meet George W. face-to-face. Meyer writes: "He was friendly, open and unpretentious. He was smart." Anyone who lived through the Bush years with its near-constant refrain that



the President of the United States was stupid will hear the weight of that last word. This essay, and Osborne's, will both be of assistance to future historians.

This book can be read sequentially, of course, but many readers will find the temptation to dip in and out too much to resist. It isn't necessarily the case that when you've finished reading about John Adams you immediately want to read about Thomas Jefferson; why not fast forward and get a blast of Ronald Reagan, then swoop back, having basked in Reagan's success, to get a sense of the disastrous regime of James Buchanan.

None of these presidents is really without relevance today – and some remain points of live controversy. Thomas Jefferson's ownership of slaves continues to vex us, especially as he seems to have such a contemporary

intelligence. Lincoln's position as one of the greatest leaders in history is evermore assured with each passing year.

One interesting experiment is to begin at the end and travel away from the present. In one sitting I read the following essays in this order: Biden, Trump, Obama, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Ronald Regan fetching up a few hours later at Jimmy Carter. If you travel that trajectory you can see the world regaining its innocence, and partisanship receding.

**"This book can be read sequentially, of course, but many readers will find the temptation to dip in and out too much to resist."**

It is a perennial fact of commentary today that presidents are always compared to their predecessors. Biden, the current incumbent, has been compared to many of these presidents at one time or other. When he was strong-arming the Senate into his infrastructure plan he was today's Johnson; when he was doing Covid relief in his first 100 days he was FDR; and when he pulled out of Afghanistan he became Carter, whose company he has generally been keeping ever since.

Trump meanwhile was sometimes a sort of turbo-charged Reagan to his

admirers, or Andrew Johnson to his detractors. Obama meanwhile compared himself to Kennedy or Lincoln – but sometimes he also had a kind word to say about George H.W. Bush. His detractors meanwhile compared him to Carter when they weren't comparing him to Hitler.

And so on and so forth. So what does it all amount to? A book like this has its Shakespearean side – we see the quiddity of human material facing up to the currents of history and either succeeding or failing.

For the most part the historians in question, as they did in the previous volume, refrain from making any real judgements as to whether their subject was actually good for the country. They instead consider whether they met their objectives without us knowing if what they actually did was really beneficial. This is to some extent made up for by an essay at the end of the book by Alvin S. Felzenberg called *Ranking the Presidents*. This, as always, turns out to be an exercise both too subjective and too objective. The criteria historians tend to select tend to be sufficiently banal so that one cannot easily object: Character, Vision, Competence, Economic Policy, Preserving and Expanding Liberty and so forth. Once you have created such broad categories your judgement is necessarily very subjective.

For instance, in the Liberty category, Obama has a score of '4', and Trump a score of '1'. What does Obama's 4 refer to? It is difficult to say since certainly from 2011 onwards after losing the Senate, Obama felt obliged to rule by executive fiat which cannot really be

claimed to have expanded liberty. Is his score more to do with his personal achievement of being the first black President? That was a magnificent achievement, but it is difficult to be sure what the score is referring to.

**"So a book like this will more often lead to entertainment rather than depth."**

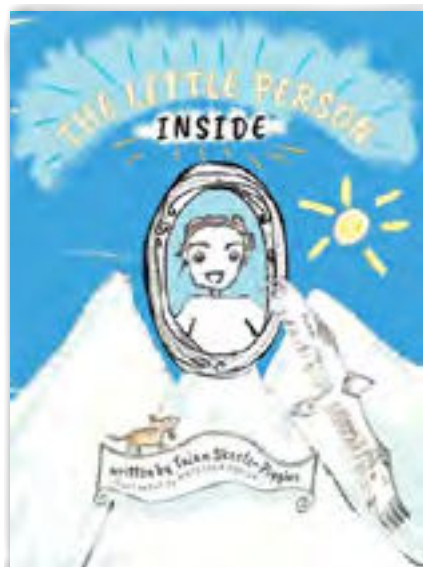
Similarly, in respect of Trump, while his score of 1 in the same category is surely meant to (rightly) rebuke him for his role in the Capitol Riots in early 2021, the score makes me want to be pedantic and point out that lowering the corporation tax burden might also be taken as an increase in liberty if you view the previous level – 35 per cent – as having been onerous for small businesses.

So a book like this will more often lead to entertainment rather than depth. Narrative arc tends to be incidental and 40 or so writers writing independently won't create a compelling argument – as, for instance, Gore Vidal does in his *Narratives of Empire* novels – where we see both a story told and an argument emerging.

But that doesn't mean there isn't a lot of fine writing here. There's no use complaining that a book isn't for sequential reading but for dipping into: the thing to do is to dip into it.

*Christopher Jackson*





## The Little Person Inside

BY TALAN SKEELS-PIGGINS

**This column hasn't so far made a habit of reviewing children's books, but it mustn't ever be said we don't celebrate the achievements of our mentors and so an exception has been made here. Besides, this short book by Talan Skeels-Piggins is a pleasure to read and is also splendidly illustrated by Natascha Taylor.**

The book takes the form of a potted autobiography and Skeels-Piggins really does have an extraordinary story to tell: it contains lessons about resilience and creativity which apply as much to the adult reader as to children. The book resembles the hit series Big People, Little Dreams – except that it is a book about Skeels-Piggins written by Skeels-Piggins himself.

His story is heartbreaking and heartwarming all in one go. Talan has been many things but he began as a teacher, not knowing at that stage that his life would be all about the

wider lessons he has learned to impart. He writes: “He was always happy to teach others how to play. And so, he joined a big school and became the PE Teacher.” This need to impart knowledge would stand him in good stead, when the terrible tragedy of his life hit. Skeels-Piggins was the victim of a car accident, and the experience of this is described in simple terms for the young reader: “Talan was very sad. He thought he would never play again. This made him cry.”

What makes Skeels-Piggins remarkable isn't just that he did find a way to play again – becoming both a Paralympic skier, and famous motorcycle racer, but also learning that his own story doesn't have to exist in isolation. Especially during the pandemic, it can connect to all stories – and shed a light on situations utterly unlike his.

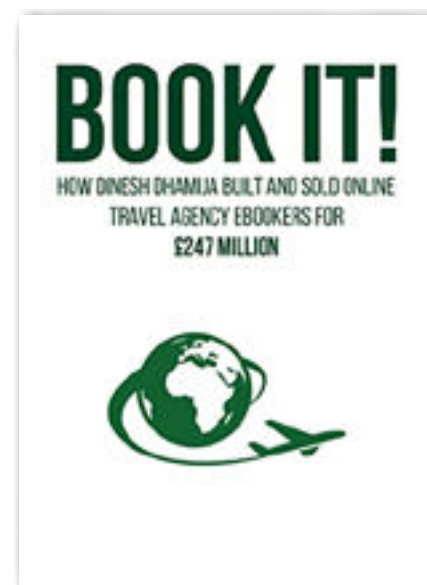
This book therefore celebrates two things – firstly it celebrates resilience, and insodoing implies that life is a thing infinitely worth being resilient about. By telling the story at all, it also celebrates our interconnectedness. As one page has it: ‘Sometimes we all feel lost.’

**“This book therefore celebrates two things – firstly it celebrates resilience, and insodoing implies that life is a thing infinitely worth being resilient about.”**

This has never been truer than in our bewildering post-pandemic world and it's this which makes the book so relevant to all of us.

Skeels-Piggins gives his readers here what he also gives Finito candidates: that affirmation that difficult times are where we really find out who we are – and that they might have a surreptitious value secreted in them. Perhaps, we may even arrive at the astonishing position of being almost glad of the hardship we suffered, as it was only by experiencing adversity that we learned what we had in ourselves to traverse it.

Christopher Jackson



## Book It!

BY DINESH DHAMIJA

**Dinesh Dhamija's company Flightbookers had a pokey office in Holborn and a contract with Nepal Airlines, one of dozens of 'bucket shop' travel agents in 1980s London. He would hustle airlines for cheap seats and sell them to Australian backpackers or British students looking for adventure.**

Then came the internet.

Dhamija was transfixed, obsessed, energised. He flew to California to sit at the feet of the pioneers: Larry Ellison of Oracle, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs. “They make money while they're asleep!” he realised, astonished by the automation of what had previously required expensive and time-consuming labour.

**“He's a stunningly successful entrepreneur with the mindset of an explorer, always seeking new experiences.”**

Back home, he hired a computer whizz and set up ebookers, to see if online travel might work in Europe. At first a trickle, then a stream and then – within months – a torrent of business took Dhamija into commercial orbit.

ebookers went public on the Nasdaq exchange in 1999 and Dhamija immediately invested in search engines, gaining a virtual monopoly on AOL and Yahoo! flight bookings.

This was a further masterstroke. Soon, ebookers had a billion-dollar valuation and Dhamija had a spreading empire of offices across Europe, with a fulfilment base in India, staffed imaginatively with gap year Europeans who explained Western culture to their Indian colleagues.

In 2003, sensing the imminent arrival of American competition, Dhamija sold ebookers for £247 million and embarked on his next careers, in politics, investment and philanthropy.

He was elected as a Member of the European Parliament, built a property portfolio in Romania and established charitable foundations in the UK and India.

Dhamija's autobiography, Book It!, tells this story with flare and wit, from his family background in India, with an ancestor called Jassa Singh, a Sikh warrior who conquered Delhi in the 18th century, through to his own battles with authorities – the Nepali government threatened him with prison before he won an international case against them.

There is an adventure on almost every page: Dhamija was inches away from bankruptcy, but survived by winning a car in a raffle. As a child living in Mauritius, he was almost killed by 250 km/h winds that devastated his home. He's a stunningly successful entrepreneur with the mindset of an explorer, always seeking new experiences.

Along the way are vignettes of Dhamija's pet loves: his favourite British and international golf courses, the entrepreneurs he admires most, the inside story of the UK's political relations with India and the prospects for solar energy. At the age of 72, he retains the energy, imagination and ambition of a man half his age.

This drama-filled, fascinating, inspiring account of a buccaneering business pioneer makes tremendous reading. **f**

David Nicholson

## Between Jobs at Il Palagio

*At the point between work and leisure,  
rote hours retain their claim in the body,  
and will not yet be shed:  
they live in the bone, as a signature  
of what was necessary this past year and more.*

*Flip-flop-shod,  
without anything particular to do,  
I keep appointment with the vineyard path,  
walking the patterns of the olive shade,  
the ancient curves of Tuscany  
the best the world has come up with,  
my sole calendar the mountain's tracery.  
Toil had this missing in its addictions.  
Toil took me away from... what exactly?*

*Now a cockerel screams,  
and renders me leftwards-turning,  
towards a portion of what I've needed –  
and which I so suddenly see,  
it is as if I never held a job nor will again:*

*indiscriminate wildflower, poppy and daisy,  
bank-grasses –  
and most of all, the wind playing in all that,  
incarnate, and whipping the light,  
or the light catching it, just ever so slightly,  
in the gaps between the flowers,  
and the heart quickening its pace  
at something it's seen, and knows again,  
having not known this in so long –  
that there is a kind of bell that hides in nature,  
which we're meant to hear, and even obey,  
and I move on, a new role triggered within  
which shall keep me busy  
this side of things being tethered to the temporal.*

Martin Plantinga



# The Hotel de Russie in Rome and the Hotel Savoy in Florence

GEORGE ACHEBE

The Rocco Forte collection is bouncing back post-pandemic showing that the industry still holds opportunities for graduates

**I**t is an aspect of the absurdity unleashed by the pandemic that work sectors experienced contraction, stability, or even expansion, according to their relationship to human touch and proximity. It is as if someone had madly gone through society punishing only people over six feet six, or those with red hair.

But though it was a pretty safe bet being an air pilot or an events manager before Covid-19 had its way with the world, I still think the reversal experienced by the hotel sector counts as the most symbolic. Most of us never saw an empty aeroplane – we saw empty skies. And events moved online.

But we all cancelled our holidays, and many of us can easily imagine an empty hotel. We were also all too familiar with the interiors of our own homes. Hotels are in fact symbols of power, and nothing quite so brought home the strangeness of coronavirus than their sudden lapse into emptiness, and the surrealness of furlough.

They had a particularly powerful advocate for staying open in the shape of Sir Rocco Forte, who has been vocal in Finito World and elsewhere about government policy which he views as



far too restrictive. The mask has had no greater foe, and social distancing no greater cynic than Forte. But then most people would be cynical of any government regulation which cost them £100 million overnight as this one did.

Once the pandemic began to lessen a little, I realised it would be a missed opportunity not to return to Italy, the heart of the Forte empire, to see how his two great hotels – the Hotel de Russie and the Hotel Savoy – had fared in the interim. There was more than curiosity at work here: I've always loved these hotels and sometimes feel I am simply marking time in London, waiting to go back to them.

Rome is, in its way, one of the most powerful nouns on the planet. It seems almost to have the same force as those large abstractions: love, peace, truth,

goodness. It connects back to a former time – or a series of former times – which seem to contain people who were better and wiser than we are now.

Perhaps that's never felt more the case than to return there now after the pandemic. Our forebears lived daily with the thought of death; it can sometimes seem as if we have sanitised it. It has also to be said that nowhere I've been in the world has quite such a passion for regulation as Italy. Whether this is an inheritance of Catholicism, or a more mysteriously national appetite for rules, I've never been able to decipher. But it's definitely the case that if in Italy you walk into a sandwich shop and forget your mask for even a moment you run the risk of being accosted not by an owner but by a customer. This is a noticeable difference in cultural mores



which no doubt must vex Forte himself.

To look at Italy politically there is a sense that it has fallen on hard times, with debt levels not far off Greece's, and significant poverty especially in the South, where a shadow economy may or may not be making life more supportable for young people, depending on which economist you speak to. I sometimes think that the beauty and the significance of Italy's history somehow excuses it from doing anything in the crucial realm of the present. But I forgive it this as everything else: I've never been unaware in Italy that this is a country which has fallen on somewhat unhappy times since the time of Michelangelo; but then I've never minded much because I'm in the country of Michelangelo.

The Hotel de Russie is right under the Borghese Gardens, next to Piazza del Popolo. That makes it reasonably near

the Spanish Steps and about a half hour walk from the Coliseum and the Forum ruins. It's a hotel so good it makes you delay your sight-seeing a little – and that's the case even in a city where you know you're ridiculously up against the clock on a long weekend, since there is more to see here than can be seen in a lifetime.

The Hotel de Russie's Secret Garden sweeps upwards in attractive tiers, almost as far as the Borghese. It is a place of white climbing roses, yews and palm trees. Water fountains trickle on each tier, meaning that breakfast is a calm affair. Several years ago, they used to serve delicious honeycomb as part of the buffet, but that has now been jettisoned due to the pandemic, a sad legacy.

The hotel has a star-studded history. It was here that Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau stayed when collaborating on

Palade, the first of the so-called Ballets Russes, a production which counts as the first Cubist ballet. The hotel is justifiably proud of this heritage, and has a Stravinsky bar, and a Picasso suite. On the top floor there is a vast apartment with a sauna in it where the cast of Ocean's 11 reportedly stayed.

On our first day, exhausted by EasyJet's tendency to demand farmers' hours of its clientele, we were jolted into wakefulness by the magnificence of the Coliseum. Vaccine passports were on use in that attraction – and in all the others we went to – and seemed to work well.

Inside, you feel dwarfed by the scale and ambition of what you find, and overwhelmed by the evidence of a civilisation with more intellectual force than ours. It is a strange thing that our society for all its ingeniousness seems to lack some quality which theirs had. Perhaps the Roman confidence can only





Garden at the Hotel de Russie

come once to a species, but that doesn't mean we can't learn from it, and enjoy a touch of nostalgia along the way. Of course, in the process we must be careful not to turn a blind eye to the brutality of gladiatorial combat and slavery. But the fact remains: there is something about being in Rome which makes you want to do something big with your life, and why not begin that today?

The ruins of the forum will forever remain one of the sites of the world, especially at sundown, when they are filled with a melancholy light which knows all about the rise and fall of civilisations. It is futile, by the way, to search here for the place of Julius Caesar's assassination since that took place around a half kilometre away in the Largo di Torre Argentina.

What are we searching for among these ruins? It seems to relate to some lack in ourselves which is betrayed by our glass architecture, our world of consumption, our frenetic pace. It is said by John Buchan that the peoples of the past were all storm and sunshine – that is they lived next to the bad in life and so experienced a heightened sense of the

good. Anyone who even glances at the Pantheon knows that it may as well have been created by aliens: nobody alive, and least of all our modern architects, seems to know how to do this.

If Rome makes us feel as though we have become somehow pale, then this is the case too when we compare ourselves to the Renaissance. Rome isn't necessarily the best place to understand the Renaissance, partly because Raphael and Michelangelo dominated all the commissions. Besides, much of what they did is squirrelled away in the Vatican, either in rooms the public can't access, or in places the public accesses too much. Even the Sistine Chapel feels like the expression of one man's slightly cantankerous achievement.

Instead, to understand the Renaissance in its breadth and depth, you have to go to Florence, and fortunately the Rocco Forte chain have created the excellent Hotel Savoy there, this time just off the Piazza del Repubblica.

The suites here have been enlarged and the number of them reduced since I was last here in 2017, meaning that the



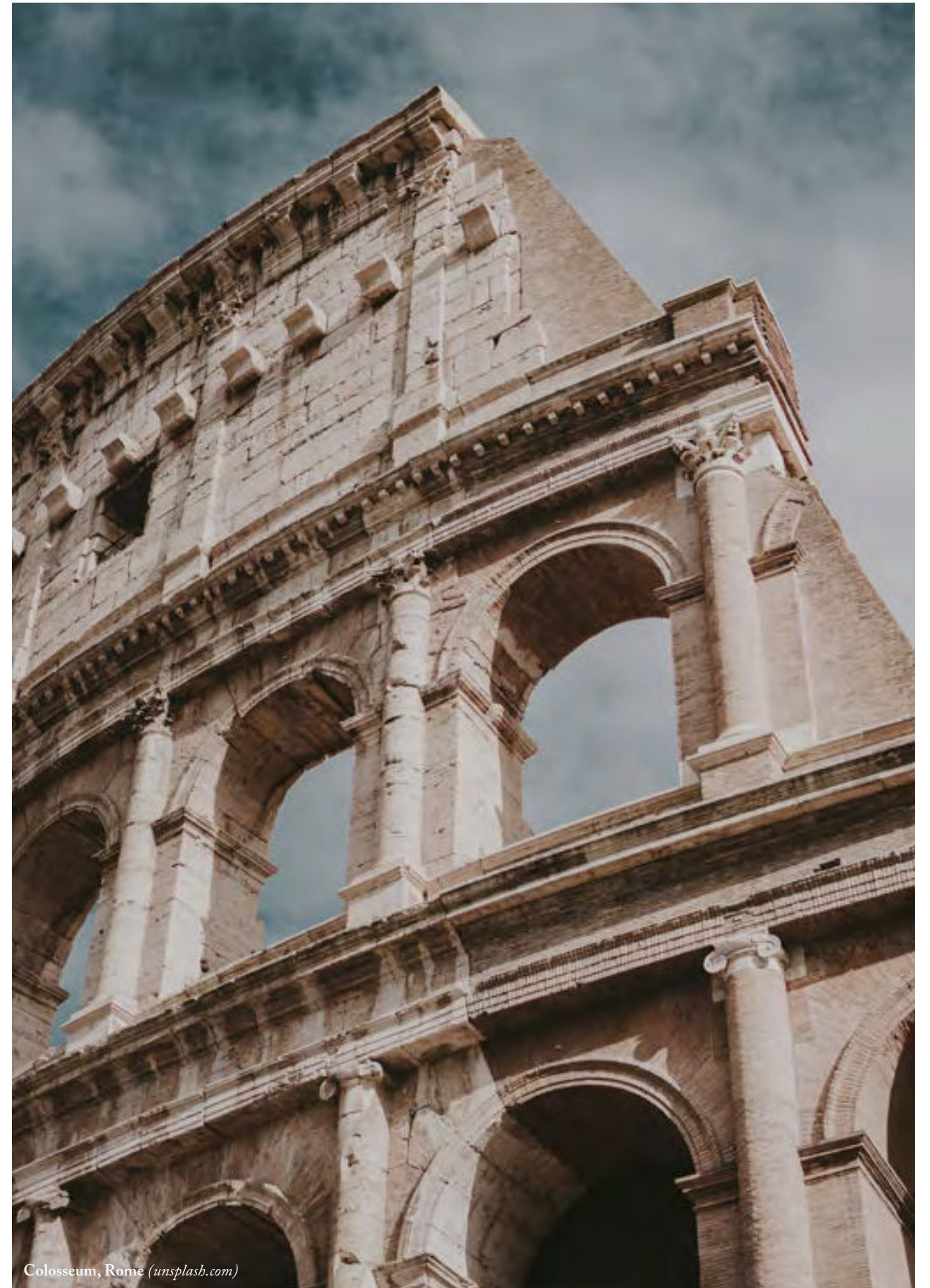
Hotel de Russie

customer has a roomier experience. The Presidential Suite in particular is one of the finest hotel rooms in the world with excellent views of Brunelleschi's Duomo and Giotto's Campanile.

Giotto didn't live to see his bell-tower completed, but Italy is a reminder that the work we do, if it's any good, will be taken on by others. The Renaissance is a relay-race: we think of it as a time of great individuals when really it was a team effort. This is perhaps best encapsulated by a young Leonardo da Vinci's role in raising the great gold ball on a pulley system to cap Brunelleschi's lantern on the cathedral. Years later, whenever he needed to summon up courage for the next big task he would recall that day: it's for others to show us what is possible, and for us to enact that on our own terms.

Italy asks that we summon up courage in our own lives. By hosting both the Roman Empire and the Renaissance it reminds us that a country can be great more than once – and it does so even in its present condition when so much else has atrophied.

The great joy of Florence is in its churches.



Colosseum, Rome (unsplash.com)



Santa Maria Novella, Florence (*unsplash.com*)

It is vital not to miss Donatello's pulpits in San Lorenzo, and while you're there not to forget to see the Laurentian Library whose steps were designed by Michelangelo. Tourists should also know that these are on separate tickets and by separate entrances, and not always open on the same day. If you go to Santa Croce make sure to visit the Pazzi chapel and its adjoining courtyard: they are places of rare peace and tranquillity.

The city has suffered during Covid, as is to be expected when the country bore the brunt of the earliest part of the pandemic in Europe. In particular, a favourite restaurant Il Menagere had not yet reopened when we were there. Meanwhile,

the Orsanmichele was permanently closed when we were there at the end of 2021 and still operates reduced opening hours at time of publication.

But world historical cities like Florence have in-built resilience which stems from their perennial desirability. Boccaccio begins his book *The Decameron* with a description of the Black Death and how it affected his contemporaries. You can still visit today the Santa Maria Novella where that scene is set, and I hope people will still be able to do so hundreds of years from now.

Inside the church you can see Giotto's Crucifixion, and Masaccio's Trinity which

more or less single-handedly started a revolution in art which still governs the way we see today. When the Black Death came, few would have imagined that the world was on the cusp of two hundred years of unprecedented achievement across every area of human endeavour.

Perhaps this is ultimately what Italy has to say to us now: that any civilisation worth its salt is in it for the long haul. And although the Rocco Forte chain has had a difficult pandemic, one senses that these magnificent hotels will bounce back also. The good things in life always do because ultimately that's what people want. *f*

## Costeau

### JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI TEN YEARS ON



**A**s Costeau was hunkered down on lockdown eating another sushi Deliveroo, it suddenly came unbidden that the marvellous documentary *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* is now 10 years old.

This proves a useful excuse to discuss what is not only the greatest movie about sushi, but perhaps one of the great movies about work. The film follows Jiro Ono, an Itamae (or sushi masterchef), in his quest to make the perfect sushi: it is a tale of waking obsession about how to get better at something. Inso doing it documents a rare work ethic, and shows us the complex business of running a great restaurant. It is a film which would be as much value to an HR manager as to a budding chef: the film shows not just how to work hard yourself but how to instil those habits in those around you.

Interestingly, Jiro is in the Guinness Book of Records as the oldest chef to win three Michelin stars. Part of what the film shows is the importance of bedding in for the long haul. Even an apparently small corner of life like sushi turns out to be endlessly intriguing if you only look at it with the right degree of curiosity. As Jiro says at the beginning of the film: 'Once you decide on your occupation, you must immerse yourself in your work.'

In one sense, this feels like a peculiarly

Japanese lesson. It was the Japanese painter Hokusai who said: "At 90, I will enter into the secret of things. At 110, everything – every dot and dash – will live." Jiro is like this with sushi. Jiro is 85 in this film, has since made sushi for President Barack Obama, and is 96 at the time of writing.

Behind every great career, there is clarity of thinking: to make a good choice, and then come in behind that choice with years of graft. This film also reminds us that at the start of our lives, we face a simple choice about whether to seek excellence or to coast. As Jiro points out, to change the world, you need to have talent. And then it's just a question of whether you work hard.

This film shows not just Jiro's work ethic, but the effect of that ethic on his sons, who must struggle to follow in his footsteps. Each admits that in the beginning, they hated their apprenticeship, since their father took such a hard line, in the belief that graft is ultimately meaningful, even in its way liberating. There is the occasional hint of generational disparity as young Japanese people fail to take on the heritage that Jiro has created.

There are amusing moments. Jiro says young people want a lot of spare time and

they want a lot of money. But for Jiro, this is not the way to live: he has stated that he dislikes holidays because it makes him itch to get back to work. Some of the apprentices in the film have reportedly left Jiro's tutelage after a very short period – sometimes after only one day.

We are left in no doubt that it would have been better for them to stay. In one marvellous moment, we hear from Jiro's apprentice as he learns how to whip tamago (egg sushi) after four months of continually getting it wrong. Finally, Jiro tastes his latest effort and says approvingly: "Now, that's how it's done," causing the apprentice to burst into tears. The master-apprentice relationship works only if it is respected by the apprentice: it is an anecdote which shows that equality in the workplace can sometimes be profitably balanced with hierarchy.

This is a film with much to tell us as we resume life after the pandemic, having enjoyed or endured a period of pause. Costeau is aware of a certain pent-up energy within all of us. Sometimes we don't know quite what we should strive towards with it. This film tells you. It's called excellence and it's an each of us. *f*

*Jiro Dreams of Sushi* is available on Netflix



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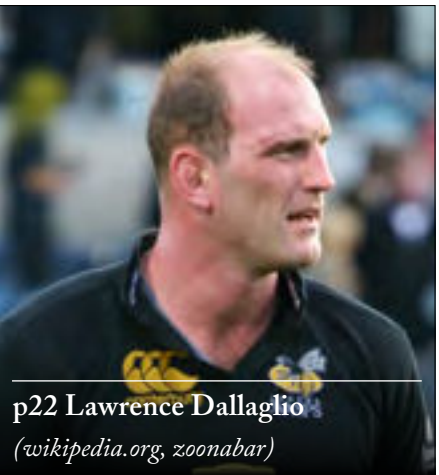
p26 Rebekah Caudwell Dupart  
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p28 Stephen Fry  
(wikipedia.org)



p144 Damon Albarn  
(wikipedia.org, Henry W. Laurisch)



If you would like to contribute or be interviewed, please get in touch.



# CLASS DISMISSED

## Roger Daltrey

REBECCA WALKER TALKS TO THE WHO SINGER AND TEENAGE CANCER TRUST PATRON ABOUT HIS NEW CRAFT ALE, THE MUSIC INDUSTRY AND HIS NEW SOLO TOUR

### So tell us about your new beer?

It was something that I started with my son-in-laws and my son during lockdown because we were all sitting on our hands and unlike the civil service we got off our butts and did something. Beer is the new wine. There's so much wine in the world you could bathe in it. Everybody's doing vineyards but the craft beers they are fantastic and we've managed to find a really great brewer. We're wiping our nose every week. We haven't made any profit yet but you know, it's exciting to do it. I never realised how good beer could be when you're drinking the mass produced stuff it's not like a craft beer at all. It's totally different it's like a really good claret.

### You've been quite vocal about the state of the music industry. Do you have sympathy for young musicians?

Musicians were very poorly treated in lockdown, most of them are self-employed. They couldn't be furloughed. They were being crucified. I planned to put it together last year and I could smell the way the wind was blowing with a new wave of Covid and our so called scientists and their models which are so inaccurate. If you bought a car with that many faults you would take it back immediately and never buy another car of that model but there you go.

### It seems as though streaming services preclude musicians from earning a proper living?

They do. It's a huge problem. The whole record business has been stolen by overseas huge conglomerate record companies and the streaming companies and of course they're all working on the model that was made when they were taking sensibly or reasonably 75 per cent of the income because they had to produce it they had to distribute it, they

(wikipedia.org)



had to you know promote it so the artist was quite happy to take a very small cut. The streaming companies pay so little per play that what's left for the artist is you can have a billion streams and you'll earn about 200 quid. That ain't fair. If that's your yearly take home pay you might as well be a welder.

### Is there anything Parliament can do?

They are examining it but the trouble is they don't understand about the music business – they've never understood it. We're always a pain in their ass. This country leads the world in popular music and that claim now is not coming to this country, it's going abroad. Our industry it's all going abroad.

### What's your take on social media?

The younger generation want to be careful of the world they're creating. All of this micro brain management – I don't think it's very good for us. I've never been a fan of the internet: I think Twitter and social media has got its good points but it seems to have brought out the worst in sections of society. It feels like it's the end of civilisation to me.

### You don't strike me as very impressed with the state of science behind climate change?

One thing you have to remember: All these scientists doing all this stuff – whether they're right or wrong I'm not commenting on that – all I'm going to try and say here but all the scientists giving out all of these predictions are the same kind of scientists that gave out the Covid predictions. How wrong were they. Is there enough scrutiny going on?

### Back to music, you've been vocal about the government needed to come up with coronavirus insurance schemes?

We're not asking the government to pay anything: we're asking for the standard insurance which we would pay for. We would be covered for the expenses we incur in starting a tour: by the time we go on tour this time we'll be about a million and a half dollars in debt and if they say we're locking down again, that's a huge problem. All we're asking is that if they closed us down they would cover our costs. I think that's fair.

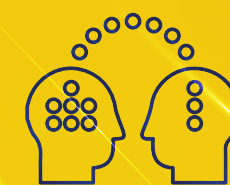
### And how are you healthwise?

I'm as deaf as a post, eyes are going, ears are going but the voice is alright. I haven't quite gone the full Tommy. F

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